Hakuinden, A Byakko Legend: Volume II: Kage

VraieEsprit

Fushigi Yuugi

Abandoned



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VraieEsprit

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Summary

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Description

In the mists, a shadow has been awoken by a divine hand. In the mountains a demon has also been stirred as Toroki's last prophesy comes true. Arina finds herself in a strange land, as her connection to Suzuno becomes slowly clearer. Please review! :

Chapter 1

白寅伝
Hakuinden: The Legend of the White Tiger

Introduction & Disclaimer

I've had a couple of people ask if I was ever going to do anything about this story, and actually I was surprised;) I thought nobody actually cared that much about it, so I let it slide in light of other things.

I'm hopelessly busy at the moment, and what I'm uploading now was written mostly last July. Writing a decent story is fun but also hard work, and I have to prioritise the things which most people are following over things that aren't getting any feedback or active interest in them. My Bleach fic is my current priority, but I have no objection in finishing at least the second instalment and maybe looking at the third if I think people are actually interested in reading it. (I do sort of want to get to a point where my concept of past Karasuki is involved, because I likes him).

Basically, if you like it, please review. Because otherwise I'll think nobody's bothered and nothing will get done.

So I'll upload the first bit, and see how it goes. It's basically in the reader's hands from hereon in :)

Part Two is called "Kage", or "Shadow". I won't explain the title because I think it will become self-explanatory as time goes on.

The significance of Suzuno's diary and of Arina's connection to it will be clearly explained in this story, I imagine, if it's not already obvious to people what that connection is. Since, obviously, Arina is no longer in the real world, the function of the book and the flashback scenes are also different in this story. Instead of being simply flashback memories from Suzuno's perspective, they will generally operate as chapters alongside the current time chapters and will tie the story together, it's hoped, into something more coherent. For the most part the recollections of Suzuno's adventures will be told from her point of view or from the point of view of either of two of her seishi. One of those seishi is Toroki, on account of her sight. The other I won't reveal yet, since it would be too much of a spoiler at this stage. But the reasons for it will, I think, make good sense.

The first story introduced three Seishi in Suzuno's past world — Tokaki, Tatara, Toroki. In the present, three Seishi were referenced (one of which was obviously Toroki/Myoume, right?). This story should introduce at least one, probably two more Seishi to Suzuno, and will reference at least two more Seishi in the present. (Possibly three. I'm not 100% sure yet). I won't say who is what or anything else yet except to say that there's no reason for them to appear in the same order in the present as they maybe did in the past.

For the sake of saving confusion, at the moment I intend the **original** incarnations of Byakko's people to be referred to by their stellar names. *There is one exception to this rule which will also become clear as the story progresses.* Conversely, and as with Myoume's example, the **reincarnated** Byakko Seishi will be referred to mostly by their given names. This might not be in keeping with Watase-sensei's style but if you've got two characters called Tokaki knocking about it begins to get a bit confusing, right? And it seems to me that the originals are the originals so deserve the proper names ;)

As ever, I don't own Yuugi or any of Watase Yuu's concepts. Any of Watase-sensei or Nishizaki-sensei's characters used are used with acknowledgement of their ownership and hopefully won't result in too much warping or bending to fit the storyline. Any additional characters not printed about in official Fushigi Yuugi sources are my own creation, as is the foundation of Suzuno's legend. This is not an official interpretation, simply my own fan interpretation of what MIGHT have happened when Suzuno came to Sairou. Consequently the incarnations (past and present) of Toroki, Amefuri, Kokie and Karasuki are entirely whims of my own imagining and not based on anything Watase-sensei may or may not devise in the future for her Byakko Seishi. The reincarnated forms of Tokaki, Tatara and Subaru are inspired in part by the originals although not carbon copies! The Meihi tribe and any other tribe not mentioned in Fushigi Yuugi literature is also my creation. Yaminzoku, Bakuzoku and other Yuugi-referenced peoples are copyright to the authors involved and not to me!

With that said, on with the story!

第二巻：影

Volume Two: Kage

"Kizutsuite yowaru teoi no kemono demo ikiru no ka, nigeru no ka, subete jibun shidai"

(Even a damaged, weakening, wounded beast has to decide for himself whether to run or to live)

Nuriko "Perfect World"

Synopsis

Prologue
Beyond the Blue Sky

The meadow stretched for miles and miles, flowers blooming at irregular intervals among the blades of grass that still glittered with dew. In the sky above, the sun was beginning its daily climb, launching itself higher and higher and from the clustered buildings over the horizon came the sound of children laughing and playing as their adult guardians busied themselves with morning tasks.

From the brow of the hill, a lone figure stood watching them, a faint, almost nostalgic smile on his face as he took in the eager shouts and calls of the young boys and girls as they tossed a worn ball between them. Even from that vantage point he could see the genuine camaraderie that the young ones shared, and from somewhere deep inside he felt a pang of recognition as if once, in some distant time, he had had that feeling too.

He had not been to this one before. Many days had passed since he had begun his journey, so many that he no longer knew how long he had been travelling or how many places he had seen. He had simply followed the glow of the sun, seeking its warm rays. So long as there was sun, he knew, there was no darkness. And it was only in the darkness that he had fear… when doubts and troubles returned to plague him and torture his very dreams with taunts and jeers.

He leant up against the trunk of a nearby tree, folding his arms across his chest as he took a moment to reassure himself. The sky was clear and blue, he reminded himself. There were no shadows here. For the time being, at least, he was safe. In the sky above his head, birds sang and danced as they strengthened their bonds of courtship ready for a season of new births, and something in their gentle, repetitive melody calmed his ragged emotions. This was a place of life and happiness, and if he pushed forward and tried his best, maybe he would be able to become a part of it.

Thus comforted, the man made his way cautiously down the hill towards the small settlement, observing the children at their merry game as he did so. They did not step back to avoid his coming, but nor did they acknowledge his presence, and although he brushed right past the leader, he did not even generate a shout or a glance from any of the youngsters. For some reason their disinterest made him feel lonely. Everyone in this place seemed to belong, he reflected sadly. But not him. For some reason he could not touch these people — and deep down inside he knew they could not even see him.

So this was not his place, then. It was not the place of peace that, in absence of all other memories and knowledge he somehow knew he was on a pilgrimage to find. His name, his past, his future — all had been

obscured in his daily battle between the sun and the darkness. Yet somehow he knew that if he kept on going, eventually he would find that place which would welcome him as one of its own.

But it was not this place, and he would have to travel on. Inwardly he shivered, disliking the curl of fear that gnawed at the edge of his awareness. He would have to face the darkness between this sunny place and the next, and he knew only too well what monsters that darkness was capable of concealing.

He made his way through the village, preparing to set out on the winding trail that, like so many others, led into an unknown, unseen future. As he reached the cluster of willow trees, however, he felt a sense of someone watching him and he faltered, raising his eyes from the ground as he tried to work out where the sensation came from. At first he thought it must be imagination — a delusion put into his mind by his tiredness and his apprehension of once more facing the night demons. Yet even as he told himself this, he met the eyes of a stranger and all thoughts flew from his head as he registered the intensity in this apparition's golden stare.

For a moment nothing seemed to move, as if even the breeze through the trees had been quelled by this snow-haired, amber eyed individual. Then, soundlessly and purposefully the newcomer stepped forward, approaching the traveller until he stood only a few steps away. As he moved, the green and pleasant landscape seemed to blur into a whirl of lights and colours until there were none but the two of them left, face to face in a strange, disorientating swirl of light.

Too struck to even speak, the traveller swallowed hard, unable to flinch back as the apparition reached out a hand to touch his shoulder.

As soon as those claw-edged fingertips brushed against the traveller's skin, a bevy of images and emotions flooded through his senses, causing the man to gasp and fall back under the weight of their intensity.

"I am sorry." The white-haired apparition spoke softly, in words that seemed silent yet capable of resonating across the whole of the strange world in which they now found themselves. "I have need of you."

*"**You…**" At length the traveller found his words, recognition and anger flooding through him as he realised who the stranger was.*

"Yes." As if guessing his thoughts, the apparition nodded. "Your instinct is correct. I am that one. You may not wish to face me, yet you must face me… it is inevitable. But this time I still have need of you. You have a duty to fulfil and I need you to fulfil it."

"Why would I do anything of the kind?" The traveller pulled back,

glaring at his companion in disbelief. "After everything…"

"If you do not, it will only become worse." The stranger shook his head slowly. "This is not my work. None of it has been. But without your help, I cannot reverse it. So I have need of you. And I must make you understand… for the sake of everyone, I must."

He reached out, grasping the traveller tightly once more as he brushed his cold pale fingers across his companion's skin. As he drew closer to the man's neck, he flexed his fingers, and the sharp, claw-like nails scraped against the skin of the traveller's throat. The touch was barely more than fleeting, but sharp enough to feel like the cut of some kind of blade, and traveller gasped at the burning pain that seemed to suddenly pierce through his skin. He brought his own fingers to his neck gingerly, touching the scratched area and drawing his hand back as if expecting to see blood. There was none, however, merely the lingering traces of iridescent opal light. For a moment he stared at these spectral fragments, as if trying to work out whether they had come from him or from the stranger and as he did so, he was aware of the faint zig-zagging of black that criss-crossed briefly across his forearms. He let out a yell, fear coursing through him as he shoved his assailant away, falling to his knees as a sudden dizziness overwhelmed him. At this obvious distress, he apparition sighed, taking a step back as he observed his companion in resignation.

"Your wounds run deeply." He observed sadly. "And you resist me, even now. Have you learnt nothing from your months of travelling, my friend? Do you not understand yet that it's a journey that goes on forever? While this goes on you cannot possibly find what you are looking for."

The traveller gazed up at him mutely, and a flicker of compassion reflected in the apparition's golden eyes.

"I am not the one you should hate." He said softly. "But I know I will not make you believe with words alone, will I?"

"I haven't forgotten so much that I don't know who you are and what you've done to me." The traveller managed, his voice hoarse as the pain of his assailant's nail marks still burned against his skin. "You gave me my memories to make me understand, but all it's done is make me hate you all over again. Why would I believe anything you said to me, ever? You aren't even able to show me your true self, trapped in that false shell as if you believe I don't know what you really are. I have nothing to say to you."

"Unless you stop and listen, you will never truly understand." The apparition said softly, such genuine regret in his odd gaze that despite himself the traveller felt his conviction waning. "Dig deep into your memories, my friend. Memories of before this time. Memories that run

deeper than the ones currently bubbling angrily across your senses. If you do, then you will see that this is not my doing. You will know how deep it runs, and the reasons why it does. And more, you will see why they will continue to cause you suffering until they are eradicated once and for all."

His eyes narrowed.

"You… and the others." He said quietly, and for a moment the traveller felt a pang of ice shoot through him as he interpreted the meaning in the other's cryptic words. A face flickered briefly across his senses and he bit his lip, fighting to control the swell of emotion that surged through his detached senses.

The will to protect someone at any cost… do you really think that's all it will take to save that one from my taint?

Through the morass of images and sounds one voice seemed to echo through, growing stronger with every moment as it taunted and teased at his wits. It was the voice of a woman, yet disembodied and rich with cold derision, and despite himself the traveller's heart quaked with fear as her words stabbed through him one more time.

Was all that you sacrificed such a small and worthless thing? Pitiful human — do you really think you can escape my spell or fox my intentions through such a feeble human gesture?

He closed his eyes, forcing his panic back as he struggled to separate the confused swirl of memories and sensations into their proper places. As he did so, he felt the shadow of something dark and twisted loom out of the black and with a jolt he realised where he had seen it before.

His eyes snapped open and he gazed at the apparition in horror.

"The darkness." He whispered. "The demons who plague me… it's ***her****, isn't it? I can hear her voice… like somehow she's able to speak through my mind. This one… it's all… been* ***her****?"*

The apparition nodded.

"A curse is a curse, regardless of when it's levelled, or at whom." He said gravely. "And you, my friend, bear the core of that curse. But it is not just on you. And as time goes on, the chance of things becoming worse are greater. It has been a long time, after all, since I was last able to intervene. Because of her magic, my own spells of protection have weakened. They will continue to do so… until it is too late."

He held out a hand, pulling the traveller to his feet.

"You may still hate me, and I am sorry for it." He said evenly. "But I want you to believe I never meant you harm. I have always done all I could

do to protect those of you touched by her curse. You are ones I value greatly — you and your brethren all. For my sake and the sake of so many, this thing has been allowed to fester and grow. And my ability to prevent it grows weaker."

He frowned.

"A century ago a girl made a prophesy." He said slowly, and the traveller's eyes widened as, unbidden, a second female voice echoed through his senses.

"Makiko's bleak vision of the future hasn't been destroyed — only postponed. And at some time in the future we will be like this again."

Softly he repeated the words aloud, and the apparition nodded.

"You remember, then." He said, an approving glint in his amber gaze. "Good. That saves time, if you can recall such things without my having to help you."

"Who spoke that prophesy?" The traveller demanded, suddenly agitated, and the apparition smiled.

"Why ask questions to which you know the answer?" He chided gently. "The one you think it was, in a time before this time."

"I…" The traveller bit his lip, as memories swirled once more against his senses. "Then if that's… but…"

"The prophesy was spoken within the Kanin mountains by the one known as Toroki to the one known as Subaru." The spectre said simply. "That was then and this is now. Things have changed beyond recognition and the soul who spoke those words has been reborn into a new form. Yet you know that if it was spoken by Toroki's incarnation, you know that it is also the truth. Makiko — the dark mage you see tainting your nightmares — she will rise again. She will be released from her prison. And without your help…"

He trailed off, and the traveller's eyes narrowed.

"Isn't it a bit late to come asking for my help?" He asked quietly. "Especially when you're here in front of me — why don't you go and do it yourself?"

"Because without the help of you and your brethren, I can't go there." The apparition said softly. "This place is not the same. You know it as well as I do, don't you? Since I touched you, you remember all of who and what you are. More, of all you have ever been."

He smiled.

"I will not make you help me. I will leave it up to you." He added. "If you do, or if you don't, the benefits and consequences will be yours to face and accept. You are one who prefers that, I think… you can think it out for yourself. But time is growing ever shorter. Before long that darkness won't simply occupy your nights. It will begin to shrivel at your days — and not just yours but the days of others, too. Here, there — everywhere."

The traveller was silent for a moment, then, at length, he raised his head.

"If you were to go there, could you stop it?" He asked quietly. The apparition nodded.

"If I was there, then yes. I could." He agreed. "But to get there…"

"I know." The traveller cut across him, holding up his hands. "I understand that bit."

He sighed.

"I believe you." He said at length, reluctance in his eyes. "I don't want to, but I do. I've seen that darkness and I've felt the oppressiveness of it as it tried to devour me. I know that you're serious, when you talk about a curse."

His eyes narrowed.

"You're saying, in fact, that all of it is because of that? Everything?" He added. "Aren't you? That all the things I thought… are because the weight of the curse's core is…"

"Sealed within your heart. Yes." The apparition nodded once more, and the traveller detected relief in his companion. "Then you do understand… and I can call on you to help?"

"But like I said, I'm like this." The traveller held out his hands, noticing as he did so that the strange black criss-crossing marks had vanished from his skin. He put his fingers to his throat, feeling the warmth there but it no longer hurt, and he offered a rueful smile, shrugging his shoulders.

"I made a choice." He added. "That choice makes your job harder, doesn't it?"

"If you will help me, then I will help you." The spectre promised. "Consider this your path to redemption, if you like. Your release from the endless, wandering prison you've been trapped in since the day you left that place and entered this. I will provide for you and you will help protect and provide for my chosen. You will be needed, far more than you realise. I will want to rely on you — will I be able to do that?"

The traveller hesitated, then, slowly, he nodded his head.

"All right." He said frankly. "All right. But no games or funny business, all right? I want to be clear on all the conditions and circumstances before I begin, this time. I don't want to lose these memories you've woken in me — any of them, regardless of where they're from. I want to be prepared, this time."

"You have my word." His companion said solemnly, pressing his hands together as they both became bathed in dazzling white light. "I will put my faith in you, my friend… for the sake of all my people, don't let me down."

Chapter 2

Chapter One

The Kanin Mountains, Sairou

The pale sun was beginning to climb in the sky over the barren desert landscape.

As it spread its rays little by little across the bleak, forbidding slopes of the mountain known as ‘Spider’s Peak’ and its less imposing neighbours, faint rays of light scattered over the rise and fall of the sheer, jagged rock face. Against the brassy blue of the heavens, two desert vultures wheeled and swooped, calling out in their raucous, spine-chilling shrieks as they scoured the land for any traveller who had been foolish enough to travel the sandy pathways without adequate supplies of food or water.

By day, even at the close of winter, the land was dry and arid with few patches of scrub or sources of water easily within sight, whilst by night, without even the unforgiving touch of the sun, the temperatures often dipped to below freezing and it was well known to all who lived near about that venturing outside unprepared during these times was as foolish as attempting to wade through Hokkan’s most bitter snowfall without so much as a cape.

In this empty stretch of land, a gaggle of five young children scrambled over the rocks and stones, laughing and calling to one another as they navigated the uneven ledges and pitfalls with the ease and experience of those who had spent most all of their life climbing. Though all were dressed in faded, worn rags, their feet bare and their skin and hair dusty from prolonged time in the sandy climate, they seemed unconcerned by either their appearance or their situation.

Orphan children were not uncommon in Sairou, particularly in times of plague or famine, and each of these youngsters had long since been abandoned in one way or another by their families as the poorest people in the local towns and villages struggled to cope with harsh summer after harsh winter. They had gravitated together, their ages ranging from the youngest, a small boy of about eight, to the oldest and the clear leader, a young girl of approximately twelve or thirteen, with dark curly hair and bright, vivid blue eyes.

Of all of them, it was probably true to say that she was the

scruffiest, for her thick hair had been neither washed nor brushed in some months and her clothes, though probably once patterned in the traditional bright colours of one of the local settlements now barely reflected anything but a deep, muddy brown. At first glance it was possible to mistake her completely for a boy, so dust-coated was her appearance, yet to the group of youngsters she was both their guide and their chieftain, and a little dirt meant nothing when it came to their unique hierarchy. She was the nimblest climber, the most deft fisherwoman and, most important at all for a band whose quest for food often led to begging or sneak-thievery, the quickest thinker when it came to getting out of difficult scrapes.

“If we’re quick, we’ll make it to the caves before the sun reaches its peak.” She said now, pausing to glance back at the other youngsters who were eagerly clambering up behind her on what was probably the most difficult and neck-breaking short-cut to the inner depths of Kumo-zan and its fellow mountains. “I want to show you what I found, and we can even shelter there, too. Hami, you haven’t eaten all the bread, have you? There’s water in these caves and we can have a proper feast, if you keep a hold of it.”

“I haven’t eaten anythin’.” The girl labelled Hami objected, casting her leader an indignant glare. “Don’t look at me like that, Haruka. It’s not me who ate the fish you caught last week. It was one of the mountain snakes — I told you, it took ’em right from beside me.”

“Like a snake’d get that close.” A young boy snorted. “Give it up, Hamiko. We all get hungry sometimes, but we share food when we do.”

“An’ I told you…” Hamiko began, but Haruka shrugged her shoulders, hauling herself up nimbly onto the next ledge.

“Save your breath for climbing an’ it’ll be worth it when we get there.” She promised. “This cave is magic, I’m sure of it. You guys’ll be sorry if you just argue and stuff an’ don’t come take a look for yourself.”

“Magic?” The youngest of the group piped in, pausing to gaze up at his ragamuffin leader with a question in his dark gaze. “What kind of magic, Haruka-neechan?”

“You’ll see when you get there.” Haruka shook her head, holding out a hand to haul the boy up beside her. “You really gotta get better at climbing, chibi. This mountain ain’t easy and you’ll fall and break your neck.”

“I can’t reach ledges like you can.” The boy looked mournful, and

Haruka sighed, casting him a grin.

“I know. I’m just sayin’ — your body’ll grow into it eventually, so you oughta start tryin’ more.”

“You could make me bigger?” The youngster eyed her hopefully, and Haruka shook her head.

“Like hell I could! I need my strength for climbin’, jus’ like you do. Pipe down, okay? Hami an’ Reiko’re climbin’ an’ they might need a hand seein’ as they’re carryin’ our lunch.”

“I can manage okay.” The girl labelled Reiko assured her leader with a wide grin, placing the carefully wrapped bundle of vegetables they had stolen from a carelessly guarded market stall at opening that morning on the ground as she prepared to scramble over the stones. “Hami, give me the bread an’ you can climb up too. Azuhi’s a boy, so he can bring himself up.”

“I’m already up.” Azuhi, the older boy said for himself at that moment, absently dusting himself down as he lounged back against the rock. “So which way is this cave of yours, Haruka? I’m already getting hungry — why don’t we eat here and then explore?”

“Because I told you, idiot, that there’s water in the cave.” Haruka said firmly. “An’ unless you want us chokin’ on dry bread, we’re gonna need to drink. Besides, none of us have eaten since daybreak — we’re all hungry. But this cave is different. It’s pretty, like, an’ special, too.”

“Is it a Yaminzoku cave?” Hamiko wondered nervously. “I’ve heard stories, Haruka… is it one of the caves that those cursed people lived in?”

“Who cares if it is?” Haruka seemed unconcerned. “They aren’t there any more. The place is deserted and noone lives inside the mountains now. Stop being so fraidy, Hami-chan. It’s just a cavern, that’s all. It ain’t goin’ to bite you.”

“You said it was magic, though.” Azuhi reminded her. “Didn’t you?”

“Yeah.” Haruka acknowledged. “But I don’t think it’s Yaminzoku magic. It’s just really pretty. Like a night sky inside a mountain. I don’t know how it got there or who made it pretty like that. But I think it was done by magic. Don’t you guys want to see it?”

“I want to see it.” Reiko nodded her head. “We should carry on, Azu-kun. We’re all hungry, but if it’s like Haruka said, it’ll be fun if we

have a cave that's our own to hide in. Besides, there have been a lot of storms lately. If we stay out here, we might get wet."

"It won't rain." Azuhi objected, but he got to his feet nonetheless. "All right. We'll go on, then. Chibi, can you manage? You look beat — can you keep going?"

"I'm not tired." The youngest member of the group shook his head firmly. "I'm fine. You won't have to carry me!"

"Then we're moving." Haruka said frankly. "Follow me. It's kinda tight through these passages — but it ain't too much further in."

"I remember my old man sayin' before he snuffed it that these caves were once smugglers' caves." Azuhi reflected, as they made their way deeper and deeper into the harsh tunnels of rock. "Course, there ain't any smugglers now. But once, you know. When there were still gems in this mountain. Then people worked here. An' smuggled rock to Kounan, too."

"It's a pity they're not here now." Haruka said regretfully. "I think I'd like to meet a smuggler."

"I wouldn't." Hamiko shivered. "They sound scary."

"You're scared of everything, though." Azuhi told her scornfully. "Besides, it might be fun t'be involved in all of that stuff."

"Did your Pa tell you anything else, Azu-kun, about the kind of things they did?" Reiko asked curiously, and Azuhi shook his head.

"Not really." He said offhandedly. "I don't remember. Jus' one of his stories — he'd tell a lot of them, whether or not anyone was listening. Besides, he died five years ago now. That's forever — you can't expect me to know exactly what he said after all that time."

"At least you remember your Pa at all." Hamiko said softly, and Azuhi shrugged.

"For all the good it does me, yeah." He agreed gruffly.

"Shut up, the pair of you." Haruka said frankly. "It ain't important if you remember or if you don't. The smugglers are gone, now, an' so's anyone else who gives a damn about where we are an' what we do, so it's a waste of breath an' effort worryin' about it. We're here an' we have each other — so we don't need anyone else. Do we? We do all right. Noone messes with us."

"Haruka-neechan is right." The youngest member of the party piped in. "Noone messes with us!"

“You shouldn’t say it like that, chibi.” Azuhi observed, amused, but there was a warmth in his gaze and the young boy grinned back. “But I guess you’re right. Haruka too. We do okay, just the five of us.”

“These are our mountains, too.” Haruka reflected. “People live in their villages an’ stuff an’ it’s fine, but they only have their houses to call theirs. We go where we like so everywhere is our home. These mountains. The desert. The little oasis beneath the southern rise where we go catch fish. Anywhere we like.”

“Sort of like the Emperor, in fact.” Reiko decided, and despite herself Hamiko giggled.

“Reiko wants to be a Princess.” She teased, and Reiko blushed, shaking her head.

“No I don’t!” She defended herself. “Jus’ the Emperor is someone who belongs everywhere he goes, isn’t he? He owns everything an’ stuff like that. That’s all I meant. We can go where we like, just like him.”

“Is the Emperor even a real person?” The small boy asked doubtfully, and Haruka snorted.

“Of course he is, chibi.” She said bluntly. “He’s King and all, ain’t he? He lives in a big rich palace and he makes all the decisions. If there wasn’t an Emperor, Sairou couldn’t be a Kingdom. And it is, right? So he must be real.”

“Have you ever seen him, Haruka?” Reiko asked, and Haruka shook her head.

“Like *hell* would I have.” She said scornfully. “What would *I* say to the Emperor?”

“You could show him your magic.” Hamiko suggested, and Haruka pulled a face.

“Yeah, right. Like that’d ever be useful to someone like him.”

“I’m sure the Emperor has much more powerful magic than Haruka has.” Azuhi added. “He’s rich, isn’t he? He can have whatever he wants. He’s probably bought all the best magicians and stuff already.”

“Besides, I wouldn’t want to be in a palace.” Haruka said decidedly. “They’d expect you to be clean an’ well mannered an’ I don’t really do either. I like living outside. It’s nice. So I wouldn’t want to go to the Emperor in any case.”

She turned, casting her grimy companions a triumphant grin as

they reached the entrance to an underground chamber.

“And here we are.” She added. “Welcome inside.”

“Holy…” As the children each stepped one by one into the huge domed chamber, Azuhi glanced up at the ceiling, his eyes big with awe and disbelief. “You weren’t kiddin’, Haru-chan. Just like the night sky inside the mountain. It really is.”

“Those gems are from inside these peaks, right?” Reiko squatted against the wall, peering up at them. “They do look like stars. Are they real star patterns, Haruka? They look like they are.”

“They look like pieces of Heaven stuck to the wall.” Hamiko said absently, and Reiko giggled.

“That’s silly.” She responded. “If it was that, don’t you think there’d be holes in the sky? But there aren’t any. So they must be gems. Right?”

“They are gems.” Haruka agreed. “But I don’t know if they come from here or not, or how they got up there.”

She shrugged.

“I just like how it looks.” She added. “I think they look like the real stars we use to find our way at night, and so it’s nice, somehow. Like it was made for us. Don’t you think so?”

“Well, now we’re here, we can eat, right?” Azuhi remarked, and Haruka nodded.

“There’s an underground lake just beyond that archway.” She agreed. “With all the water you could ever want to drink. We should fill up our gourds and have a feast beneath the stars — don’t you think so?”

“A feast beneath the stars in the middle of the day.” The group’s youngest member wriggled in anticipation. “That sounds magic all right to me.”

“I told you so.” Haruka said proudly. “I said it was worth coming here. Didn’t I?”

“How did you find it, Haru-chan?” Azuhi asked quizzically, and Haruka shrugged.

“By accident.” She admitted honestly. “I was just exploring and I found the entrance. But I never forget a route once I’ve done it. And noone else seems to be using it… so I figured, why don’t we? Noone will find us here. No stuffy town officials or fat market traders. We can

stay as long as we like and noone comes into the mountains any more so noone will know we're here. It's perfect."

"Not quite." Azuhi squinted upwards. "Look. That one on the end — it looks like something's been diggin' at it or somethin'. It's all comin' away — half the stones are cracked an' crumblin' like bats got into them."

"Bats?" Hamiko's eyes widened, and Haruka sighed.

"There ain't any bats." She said firmly. "An' I guess the pattern's been here a while, so it's not a surprise it started to break up. Probably with the storms we were having one of them hit the peak or something like that. It happens, sometimes. The whole earth shakes, then. And this is an old cave. Maybe the stars were done by smuggler people, and they're gone a long time ago now. That would make sense, if they had gems and stuff back then. So of course it won't last forever. Stuff does break, you know."

"Maybe… you could fix it, Haruka?" Reiko suggested, and Haruka frowned.

"I'm hungry." She objected. "It's not like it's going to fall in on us or anything. Why would I bother tampering with it any?"

"Because it would be prettier, if it was all fixed and shiny like new." Reiko responded. "Don't you think so? It's our cave, after all. You said so. And it just seems a shame. Those stars seem sad, over there, because they're chipped and broken."

"They're just gems, Rei, not stars." Azuhi snorted, but Reiko shrugged.

"Maybe, but they seem like stars." She replied. "And it wouldn't be like we'd have to climb up or anything. Haruka can just use her magic and fix it, like she fixed Hamiko's sash when she got it all caught an' torn in that patch of thorns the other week. We all know she can, so it wouldn't be a big deal."

"I agree with Reiko." Hamiko nodded. "You *could* do it, Haruka. You've fixed all kinds of stuff before, and it's been all right afterwards. And it would be prettier, if all the stars were glittering together again. That one does look kind of sorry, on the end."

Haruka sighed, sinking down against the wall as she glanced at her hands.

"I guess, if it bothers you that much." She agreed. "Though if I do, I want first pick of the market takings. Okay? Magic is hungry work, an'

I'm already starving."

"All right." Reiko nodded, spreading out the cloth on the ground. "Azuhi, you and I should go get water from the other room. Chibi and Hamiko can help divide up the food while Haruka's fixing the roof and making it all nice again. After all, if there aren't any bats in here, Hami would probably be happier staying."

"Definitely." Hamiko nodded. "I'll help sort the food. And I won't eat any either, Azuhi, before you say anything!"

"I didn't say a word." Azuhi retorted neatly, scooping up the battered gourds. "Come on, Rei. Let's go fill up. If there's as much as Haruka says there is, we should be good for ages."

With that he and Reiko disappeared into the cave at the back, leaving the other three alone in the main chamber. As Hamiko and the youngest boy carefully began to divide up their meagre rations, Haruka stood back, eying the broken gems with a thoughtful look on her face.

Surely it wouldn't be that hard to fix, after all. Just as Reiko had said, she had often used her magic in the past to repair damaged clothing or even, on one occasion, to make Hamiko's hair shorter as a practical joke. This was just a handful of gems and a cracked stone wall… it wouldn't take much at all to fix it back the way it had been.

"And they do look like real star patterns, don't they?" She mused out loud. "Like the stars to the West, in fact. If we didn't have those, sometimes we'd lose our way at night. So maybe Reiko's right. We should fix them."

"Do you think the real stars can get broken if we don't?" The young boy asked, and Haruka shrugged.

"Dunno." She admitted. "But either way, this is easy enough to do. You focus on the food, chibi. I'll be done in a second."

She put her hands together, closing her eyes as she felt the familiar prickle of warm magic surge up inside of her, enveloping her fingers in a soft white haze as she focused all her attention on the damaged section of wall. As she pushed her hands forward, the glittering flare of snow white energy seemed to dance across the air, encircling the broken stones as it slowly began to return them to their proper places.

As it did so, however, there was a tremendous rumble and the ground beneath their feet began to shake and judder violently. Hamiko let out a scream, grabbing hold of a nearby jut of stone as Haruka tumbled to the floor, gazing up in surprise and dismay as a

second tremor and then a third rocked the chamber. As the crack began to spread across the ceiling, chips of stone and clouds of dust filled the room, and then, as Haruka raised her gaze once more to the stellar skyscape, she almost thought she saw a glitter of something strange flicker through each and every one of the carefully fashioned constellations.

She opened her mouth to speak, ready to instruct Hamiko and her young companion to flee into the room beyond, but before she could find the words a choking haze of dust cut off her speech, causing her to cough and splutter violently instead. As she struggled to get her breath, out of the corner of her eye she saw something thick and black begin to seep out of the long, jagged crack, growing ever more sinister and cloying with every second as it stretched across the full length of the cavern. As it made contact with Haruka's skin, she felt a fierce burning pain sear through her and she tried to scream, but her vocal chords were paralysed and she found herself unable to respond. Instinctively she pulled her body back, curling herself into a ball as she felt the flicker of warm magic inside her grow stronger and stronger till it had enveloped her completely. As she did so, the earth shook a fourth and final time, and distantly Haruka was aware of a whoosh of air as the thick black aura swept by her.

Then, in a moment, everything was still.

Cautiously Haruka opened one eye, fearfully glancing around the cavern as she tried to ascertain whether she — or it — was still in one piece. As she gathered her wits, she heard a faint murmur from across the other side of the chamber and immediately she was alert, ignoring her shaking body as she forced herself to her feet.

"Hamiko! Chibi!"

As she scrambled closer, Hamiko seemed to drag herself upright, rubbing her temples as she gazed blankly around her. On the floor beside her, the young boy lay still, and Haruka was quickly at their side, holding a hand out to help Hamiko to her feet as she cast a concerned gaze over the crumpled form.

"Is he… all right?" She asked anxiously, and Hamiko did not answer, merely shifting her dazed, flat eyes across to look at her companion in wordless silence. Haruka frowned, reaching out to touch her friend's brow, and the younger girl did not flinch away. Her skin was clammy and cold, as though she was suffering from shock, yet she was neither trembling nor sweating, and for some reason this cast a chill through Haruka's heart.

“Hamiko?”

The girl still did not answer, but at that moment the still form of the boy began to stir and Haruka was immediately at his side, scooping him up in her arms as she gave him a little shake.

“Chibi, speak to me. Are you hurt?”

“Haruka-neechan…?” The boy’s words were barely more than a whisper, and Haruka nodded her head.

“It’s me.” She agreed. “There was some kind of earthquake — are you all right?”

“That’s a question you should both be asking yourself.” Before the boy could respond, Hamiko’s voice cut through the conversation, yet as she raised her gaze to meet her friend’s eyes, Haruka was struck once more by the feeling that something was badly wrong. Hamiko had always been quick to cry or hide in any dangerous situation, yet there was no sign of tears in her clouded eyes, and her face bore no expression of either surprise or dismay as she took slow, measured steps towards her companions.

“Hami… neechan?” The boy murmured, and Haruka felt her grip on him tighten as something flickered and surged inside of her.

“Hami, stop it.” She scolded. “We need to make sure Rei and Azu-kun are all right and not trapped in the other chamber. You’re not acting like yourself so quit it already an’ break down an’ cry or somethin’. You’re freakin’ me an’ the chibi out so get a grip — you’re white as a ghost an’ you look half ready to faint.”

“Shut up.” Something flashed into Hamiko’s gaze at this, and Haruka’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Hami?”

“Your friend isn’t listening to you.” Hamiko responded softly. “I’ve waited a long time for you, you know. A very, very long time. When I heard that wretched Han girl’s prophesy, I knew that sooner or later you would come. But that it would be like this… you’ve made me wait a lifetime and more. Do you think that, after that, I plan on sparing your life?”

Before Haruka could respond, Hamiko had lifted her hand, a swirl of black surrounding her fingers. She brought her arm down sharply, and the flare of darkness shot out across the chamber, engulfing the both of them in the same stifling, choking cloud that had flooded through Haruka’s body minutes earlier. The young boy let out a

shriek, his body going rigid in her grip, and Haruka screwed her eyes shut, determined not to cry out as she struggled to keep her wits. As she did so, white light flared out around her body, and a curse dropped from Hamiko's lips.

"This body is nothing." She said disdainfully. "It lacks the basest life strength needed to challenge even a half-formed child like you."

"Hamiko, what's going on? What's happening — I don't understand!" Haruka exclaimed, setting the once-more limp form of the young boy down on the ground as she tried to edge herself between him and her angry companion. "What are you doing — why didn't you tell me you had magic as well?"

"You are an idiot." Hamiko said derisively, grasping Haruka by the shoulders and the startled girl felt her friend's nails digging deep into the flesh of her shoulders. "You may have her power, but you are not her, are you? You are not the one who has thought to evade my curse all this time. No wonder you were fool enough to come here. You aren't her, after all. Believe me, the next time we meet, I will have enough to kill you."

"Haruka! Hami! Chibi! Are you all right?"

Before Haruka could respond, Azuhi's voice broke through the tension in the chamber and, as if a spell had been lifted from her, Hamiko's body suddenly went limp, a flurry of blackness engulfing it as it fell like a rock to the cavern floor. Blood pooled at her lips, dripping down her face onto the hard surface, and as Haruka stared at her in horror, she realised that her friend's skin had the all too familiar sheen of grey death about it. She swallowed hard, glancing at her hands, and her eyes widened in alarm as she realised they were still prickling and dancing with fragments of pearl white light.

"What happened?" Azuhi stopped dead, staring at first Hamiko then Haruka with a growing look of shock and horror in his dark eyes.

"Haruka… what…"

"Hamiko was… the chibi…"

Haruka faltered, her gaze going to the young boy who she had tried so hard to protect, and as she did so, a wave of nausea rose up inside her, bitter bile at her throat as she took in his fragile, broken appearance. Haruka had seen enough death in her short life to know that something had stolen not only the child's life but his very soul as well, and something about his ghoulish appearance made Haruka's heart skip a beat.

“Chibi?” She whispered, taking an unsteady step forward as she tried to deny to herself what she’d seen. “Ha… Hamiko?”

“Haruka, stay back. *Stay back*!” Azuhi was between them, holding up his hands and even in the dim light Haruka could make out the tears in his eyes. “Dammit, what did you do to them? What did you *do*?”

“Do?” Haruka echoed, her usual composure deserting her as she struggled to make sense of the question. “I don’t… what do…”

“I *saw* you.” Azuhi shook his head. “You had Hamiko in your arms and then black stuff came out of her and she fell on the floor like a rag doll. I saw it, Haruka! You can’t pretend you didn’t do anything. You’re the one with magic! You put a spell on her!”

“But I didn’t! I didn’t!” Haruka protested. “I didn’t do anything like that, Azu-kun. You don’t understand! I only tried…”

“Hamiko and the chibi are *dead*, Haruka.” Reiko spoke now, her voice shaking, yet somehow cold and unfriendly as she glared accusingly at the older girl. “You were only going to fix the wall. Only a little bit of magic. Not this.”

“You probably caused the earthquake, too.” Azuhi added. “Why would you do something like this, Haru? *Why*?”

“I… I *didn’t*!” Haruka’s eyes widened and she shook her head. “I didn’t do *anything*! I just…”

“Your whole body is still glittering with it.” Azuhi cut across her, shaking his head. “You *did* do it, Haruka. You used your magic and you hurt people. I told you, I saw you! I saw what you did to Hamiko. Is that why you brought us here? Were you going to hurt all of us one by one?”

“But I…” Haruka faltered, and Azuhi’s eyes narrowed.

“Hamiko and the chibi are dead because of you.” He said softly. “This cave of yours is bad luck and so is your magic, Haruka. Friends don’t hurt their other friends and they don’t use bad spells on them, either.”

“Azuhi’s right.” Reiko got slowly to her feet. “If people find out you’ve killed someone, you’ll be put in prison and then they’ll cut your head off. And it *was* your magic. Your body is all odd and white and glittering, like you did something terrible.”

“But I didn’t mean to.” Haruka whispered, and at her tone, Reiko bit her lip.

“It doesn’t matter.” She said softly. “You did it anyway. Which means your magic is scary and dangerous, Haruka, and we can’t… we can’t trust it any more. Hami and the chibi trusted you and now they’re dead. And we would’ve been too if we hadn’t gone to get water. You ought to leave here. Now. Leave us and this place alone. You’re bad luck after all. This place is cursed, and so are you. And we don’t want to die.”

“But…”

“Go. Now. Else I’ll kill you myself.” Azuhi threatened, and despite herself, Haruka took a step back.

“Azuhi?”

“I mean it! *Go*!” Azuhi reached for a chunk of rock that had been knocked loose in the rock tremors, anger and grief in his dark eyes. “Go, now, or else… or else I’ll really do it!”

Haruka stared at him for a moment, as if unable to believe what she was hearing. Then she swallowed hard, turning on her heel and fleeing into the darkness of the passageways. As she ran, hardly caring what direction she took, Azuhi’s words echoed once more through her thoughts.

“*You had Hamiko in your arms and then black stuff came out of her and she fell on the floor like a rag doll. I saw it, Haruka! You can’t pretend you didn’t do anything.”*

“I was only trying to fix the pattern!”

“*This cave of yours is bad luck and so is your magic, Haruka. Go now, else I’ll kill you myself.”*

“But I didn’t mean to.” She whispered, tears blinding her vision. “Hami… chibi… I didn’t… *mean* to do it! I was only trying to protect the chibi — I didn’t mean to do anything to him! And Hamiko… those things she said… Oh, I don’t understand. *I don’t understand*!”

At that moment she broke through to the desert, continuing to run even though for the first time since she had begun to fend for herself she had no clear idea of the direction in which she was headed. Finally, however, her grief and her exhaustion got the better of her and, as she reached a thin cluster of trees on the outskirts of a village, she stumbled, distantly aware of the exclamations of local people as she collapsed unconscious on the sandy ground.

Writer’s Note.

Ouch. I just killed kids :S Please forgive me…

Chibi kid doesn't have a name by the way. He's just the chibi. :S

***Yaminzoku** — the tribe of cursed, night-dwelling cave people with dark hair and golden eyes that Chiriko encounters in Yuuaiden. Not that I'm keeping with Yuuaiden's canon in any way, but since they're from Sairou, I thought the clan deserved a mention even despite the fact they're 'extinct'. Who knows… they may appear again…;)*

Chapter 3

Chapter Two

Where was she?

Arina opened her eyes, her head muggy and confused as she absorbed the sudden melee of unfamiliar sounds and colours that inundated her senses. She was laying on something soft, she realised, and from somewhere not too far away, she could hear the low murmur of voices, their words soft and sweet but uncomprehensible to her ears. The smell of a wood-fire coupled with unfamiliar herbs tinged the air, and despite her disorientation, she did not immediately feel afraid. She shifted slightly, trying to get a better view of her surroundings, and as she did so, the soft voices suddenly stopped and a figure loomed into her line of vision.

Despite herself, Arina let out a startled gasp, staring up at the stranger in disbelief.

He was young — about the same age she was, with long hair caught up behind his head in a long, wavy tail. He was robed in warm fabrics, hand-stitched and beautifully embroidered with patterns and images that somehow Arina knew had some special meaning, even though she could not discern what that meaning was. But it was the man's complexion and most of all, his eyes that had struck her the most, for he was the colour of snow, his soft violet gaze somehow reflecting so many emotions that for a moment Arina almost thought she might be swallowed up by it completely. His hair glinted in the soft light of the chamber, and with a jolt Arina realised it was the colour of threaded silver, yet rather than age him it seemed to give him a timeless, ethereal appearance.

For a minute Arina wondered if she had died, and an angel had come to take her to the afterlife. Then the apparition smiled, reaching out a hand to touch her brow. He said something in the same soft, soothing tones, but try as she might, Arina could not make out his words. She swallowed hard, wetting her lips.

"Who are you?" She whispered. "And where… where am I?"

At this, the stranger paused, eying her with a mixture of wariness and confusion. He turned, saying something to the room's other occupant, and there was a murmured response followed by the sound

of a door shutting. Now they were alone, yet despite this, and despite the vulnerability of her position, Arina did not feel afraid. Something in the general, gentle aura of this stranger put her at her ease, and although the surroundings were alien, there was a comforting element to it too. These people, whoever and whatever they were, did not mean to hurt her.

A moment or two later there was the sound of the door opening again, and before long a second stranger stooped over her, his own ashen features weather-worn and aged, giving him away as being some years older. He eyed her for a minute, then offered her a warm smile.

"So you've woken up." He said softly, and Arina found she could understand his words, touched as they was with an unfamiliar accent. "I'm glad to see it. You were lucky, my child. It's cold in the snow for people of your race… you could have perished, had Kishayi not found you."

"Ki… shayi?" Arina repeated the strange word with some difficulty, and the young man who had first tended to her started, meeting her gaze with a faint, somewhat bemused smile. The older man nodded.

"Yes." He agreed. "He found you collapsed in the mountain snow. My name is Bakaru, my child — this is the Meihi village on Koku-zan. You needn't worry — we seek only to help you, not to harm you. Kishayi has summoned me only because he doesn't speak your language, and we want to help reunite you with your friends and family."

"My family." Arina murmured. Then, "Wait a minute. Meihi? Koku-zan? I don't… how did I… where is Koku-zan? I don't understand. I was in Morioka, at Suzuno-san's grave, and then… that place… with the bird. The bird… of… prey."

She faltered, suddenly alarmed, and Kishayi cast his elder a glance, saying something in his soft, even tones. Bakaru nodded, saying something in response, and the young man got to his feet, bowing towards Arina, then withdrawing from the bedside. At his sudden absence, Arina felt strangely sad — even though now she realised he was as human as she was, something in his ethereal demeanour had been comforting in her disorientation.

At her expression, Bakaru smiled.

"Kishayi is impulsive, but kind." He said softly. "And both those traits are traits you owe your life to. None of us had chosen to venture out in the blizzard, but he decided he couldn't wait for the snow to

stop before completing his errands, and in doing so, he found you and brought you back here. He's gone to get you something warm to drink — you can trust in it, and hopefully its flavour will please you. Certainly it will help you to recover somewhat. And in the meantime, I'll try and answer your questions. From your disorientation, you don't seem to be someone lost from Touran. Your clothes, too, are unusual… it makes me curious."

"You're dressed more strangely than me." Arina objected, then, realising her situation, she reddened. "Sorry. I didn't mean to sound rude. It's just… I'm confused."

"I know." Bakaru told her gently. "Will you share with me your name, child? I can't keep calling you that, when you don't appear to be much younger than Kishayi himself. I'd like to have a name to call you by — then you'd feel less of a stranger. And you may have to stay here a little while — at least until the blizzards have stopped blowing in from the North. The winter in Hokkan can be harsh even for us Meihi — for you it would be more treacherous still."

"My name is Arina. Kobayashi Arina." Arina replied, then, "Wait a minute. Did you say… *Hokkan*?"

Bakaru nodded.

"That's where you are." She agreed. "Hokkan-koku. Koku-zan. Is memory returning to you now?"

"It can't, because they're memories I don't have." Arina struggled to sit up, now alert as she stared at Bakaru in dismay. "I'm… I really *am* in the book, aren't I? Hokkan is… tell me, Bakaru-san, is there a place called '*Kounan*' anywhere near here?"

"Kounan?" Bakaru looked startled. "I see. So you come from the South, then, do you? I have to admit, I thought maybe you'd come from even further afield."

"I'm not from Kounan. I'm from Tokyo." A faint flicker of excitement stirred in Arina's heart. "But I know… people… in the South. Sort of. Is it close? You said Hokkan was north… right? How far is it to Kounan from here?"

"Some days travel by horse or carriage, if the roads are clear enough to make the journey." Bakaru settled himself down beside the bed. "I wouldn't say it was close, no."

"Some days?" Arina bit her lip. "I… I see."

She sighed, glancing at her hands.

“Do you know a girl called Hikari?” She asked softly. “S… Sukunami Hikari… do you know her?”

“Sukunami Hikari?” Bakaru’s clever eyes widened. “Seiryuu no Miko?”

“Yes!” Hope sparkled in Arina’s eyes. “Yes, that Hikari! Well, she’s my friend. And…”

“And so you are indeed from the other world, just as I suspected.” Bakaru’s smile broadened. “Your coming here is unexpected, but not unwelcome. The Meihi have a legend which tells of helping a lost traveller in distress — and if that’s what you are, Arina, we are at your disposal. I have met your friend Hikari, but only once — however, I know that one of my brethren has a greater acquaintance with her. From his own testimony, she is a good, brave child — a friend of hers can mean the Meihi no harm.”

“One of your brethren?” Arina’s eyes narrowed as she drew the heavy woollen blanket more tightly around her shoulders. “Oh! Maybe… she did mention some guy called Hyoushin, that she met when she was travelling, or something. She said he was a different race, and I think… maybe she did say Meihi, now I think about it, but I don’t remember for sure. Is there someone here by that name?”

“No — not here, but Hyoushin — or Lilaihi, as he is known to us — is still a part of the wider Meihi family.” Bakaru said easily. “He resides at Kutou’s court, with his wife and his sister also… but his ties with us have not been broken. I trust his judgement. And he trusts Hikari’s. You are welcome here.”

“Thank you.” Arina offered him a faint smile. “And for saving my life… I guess… for that too. I don’t know how I got here, but that someone was here when I did — I’m grateful.”

“It is Kishayi you must thank.” Bakaru’s eyes twinkled. “Him and his diligence both.”

“I… I suppose.” Arina pinkened. “But… erm… did you say that he… doesn’t understand what I say?”

“He doesn’t speak your language.” Bakaru agreed. “Kishayi is young, and the Meihi have always been a people who kept themselves to themselves.”

He shrugged.

“We have our culture and custom and those outside have theirs.” He added lightly. “And as a result those of us who speak fluently in

other tongues generally picked up our linguistic skills in slavery. Kishayi has never been so treated, thankfully, and so has not had the same occasion to learn. But he has heard many stories of his people's past, and as a result he's usually quite shy with those from outside of the settlement. He's never shown any inclination to learn, and it is not my habit to force someone to do something against their will."

"Slavery?" Arina looked horrified. "What kind of world is this, if people keep slaves?"

"There are no longer slaves." Bakaru assured her. "It was some time ago, now, for most of us. You needn't worry. That fate will never befall him or any of the children here, I'm sure."

He reached out to touch her shoulder.

"But I appreciate your sentiment." He added. "In your world, then, there are no slaves?"

"I can't say that there's no oppression anywhere in my world." Arina admitted. "But in my country, slavery is illegal."

"Hokkan too." Bakaru agreed. "Originally, that was why our people came back here — back to the land of our birth, where the people have accepted us more readily than anywhere else. But things have begun to change for the better… the future looks bright for all tribal peoples in the world that Seiryuu no Miko came to bless."

"Hikari really made a difference here, huh." Arina pursed her lips. "It's sort of weird, hearing that stuff."

The door swung open once more to re-admit Kishayi, a steaming clay mug in his hands, and Arina glanced up, offering him a shy smile as he knelt beside the bed, holding his burden out towards her. Carefully Arina took it, glancing at him, and he nodded encouragingly, gesturing for her to drink it. Arina hesitated for a moment, then did so, putting the mug to her lips and taking a small sip.

"How is it? Not too hot?" Bakaru asked gently, and Arina smiled at him, shaking her head.

"It's nice." She replied. "Warm, like you said. And the flavour… it tastes like some kind of heavy soup with lots of spices, but they're not like spices I've tasted before."

"It's a special Meihi broth, perfected for lost, frozen strays like yourself." Bakaru grinned. "When Kishayi found you, he was on an errand to retrieve some of those herbs from a special grove not far

outside the village, in fact."

He turned to Kishayi, saying something, and Kiyashi's eyes widened, a sudden look of embarrassment touching his pale features. He shook his head emphatically, and Bakaru laughed.

"What did you say to him?" Arina asked curiously, and Bakaru's expression became teasing.

"I was just telling him that he's obviously making progress in dealing with women." He said lightly. "There's hope for him yet, so it seems. He made that broth himself, after all — it seems apprenticing him to the village's physician was a positive move in more ways than one."

Arina flushed red, inwardly angry at herself for her uncharacteristic lack of composure. At her evident discomfiture, Kishayi's expression became even more stricken, and he held up his hands, shaking his head again. He said something, and Bakaru grinned.

"He seems to think he needs to apologise to you." He reflected. "I can't think what for."

"You're the one teasing him and me both, Bakaru-san." Arina said firmly, taking another sip of the warm broth. "I want to thank him, though — how can I make him understand that? I don't know what language you were talking, but it's not like anything I've heard before."

"I'll tell him on your behalf." Bakaru assured her, the teasing glint leaving his gaze as he offered her a smile. He glanced at his younger companion, saying something in even, quiet tones, and at the sound of it, Kishayi's expression became one of relief. He held out his hands to Arina in a strange gesture, a grin touching his features, and for the first time the angelic aura was broken as she registered the friendly warmth glittering in his amethyst eyes.

"That gesture means 'You're welcome.' Bakaru explained." It's a natural response for accepted thanks… it looks like the two of you have hit it off right away."

"Hardly, when I can't speak to him." Arina sighed, draining her mug then setting it aside. "But I do feel warmer, though, thanks to that. I'd like to get up, please, if I can. I mean, if this is a village..I'd like to see it properly. I didn't think I'd ever get to come to this world, and even if it's not Kounan, it's better than nothing."

"Yes, if you like, so long as we can find you something warm to wrap up in." Bakaru agreed. "The snow is still coming down outside,

however — so I wouldn't recommend you go outside just yet. But if you want to rise, I won't fight you. Mikoyi-sensei did say he didn't think you'd taken any harm from your experiences, thanks to Kishayi's intervention. Your own clothes aren't that warm, so I'll find someone to come help you dress in something better… I wish Rayi was still here, but in her absence, I'll see what I can do."

Kishayi cast his elder a questioning look, asking something in his sweet, low tones, and Bakaru nodded his agreement as Kishayi bowed to Arina once more, then withdrew.

"He's gone to get his mother." He explained with a grin. "Kaeli is a survivor, like me — an ex-slave and a tough lady. She also speaks your language fairly well, and she should certainly be able to understand you enough to communicate. She'll help, I know she will — she's very protective, particularly of children who are separated from their parents."

He sighed, spreading his hands.

"Kishayi is her third son." He added. "Whether she'll tell you this herself or not I don't know, but I will mention it to prevent you asking questions that might stir up bad memories. These days she has noone but him and vice versa, you see."

"But you just said…" Arina frowned, and Bakaru nodded.

"Kaeli's settlement in the East, like so many others in rebel areas, was raided by soldiers looking for slave labour they could sell to fund their treason." He said gravely. "Her two older sons were taken from her at that time, to be sold into household slavery. Kaeli and her husband were taken to the coast to be put to work on merchant ships travelling to the West. In many cases, adult Meihi were slaughtered in such raids, but because of the need for adult slaves on such voyages, coastal settlements were almost entirely sent to the whip."

He paused for a moment, composing himself, though Arina saw a flicker of pain in the old man's eye and realised that he too had suffered equally as much as the woman whose story he was telling.

"Kaeli was pregnant when the village was raided." He said softly. "And knowing this, her husband decided that he would not allow her to be treated in the awful way of a galley slave. So when they docked in Sairou, he plotted for them to escape. He and a group of others including Kaeli made a bid for their freedom, but they were all either caught or killed. All except Kaeli herself, who saw her husband die diverting slavekeepers away from her and her unborn child."

He sighed.

“I don’t know whether to tell you she was fortunate or not.” He added. “But she managed at least to find shelter and sanctuary in the West. She gave birth to Kishayi there, and worked for some time on the village plantations in return for food and shelter for her and her son. But the climate in the Western lands is hot and dry, and when one of the villagers heard that I’d established a Meihi community on the slopes of Koku-zan, she decided that it would be better to be among her own people again. I think, in part, she hoped perhaps she’d find her missing sons here — but neither hide nor hair has ever been seen of either of them.”

He spread his hands.

“That was near fifteen years past.” He concluded. “Kishayi has no memories of his time in Sairou, or of his father or brothers — though he knows what befell them, and consequently is afraid of the outside world. In that respect, I am glad it was he who found you, Arina. Maybe in the short time you are here, you might convince him that not all people from beyond these boundaries mean us tribesfolk harm.”

“That’s so horrible.” Arina bit her lip. “To have something like that…”

She trailed off.

“It sucks.” She murmured. “Kids who have parents who love them get taken away from them.”

“Kishayi’s name means ‘survivor’ in the language of our people.” Bakaru agreed gravely. “Because despite all the odds, he survived. For his sake, Kaeli found the will to go on living. And now, though her memories still haunt her, she has grown strong enough to walk forward without the constant pain of her past dragging her down. He is a fine young Meihi, her son. He will one day make an excellent physician, since he has a natural aptitude for plants and herbology and his memory is good. But I was starting to despair of ever seeing him go even as far as Touran to trade with the people there. Maybe you’ll be the turning point he needs.”

He offered Arina a smile.

“Don’t worry.” He said gently. “I’m sure that, if we can find a way to at least get you to Lilaihi, he’ll know a manner by which you can be returned to your home.”

“It’s all right.” Arina shrugged her shoulders, a wistful look in her

dark eyes. “My family won’t even notice I’m gone. They’re barely home in any case, and they outgrew their interest in me a long time ago. You needn’t rush about on my behalf. Noone will be missing me in Tokyo, believe me.”

“I see.” Bakaru’s expression softened. “But I think you’ll find a lot of things in this world are alien to your own.”

“Probably.” Arina owned. “From what Hi-chan told me, definitely. But I do want to see her, Bakaru-san. If there’s some way I can… then that’d make the whole thing worthwhile. Even almost freezing to death — if I get to see Hikari again. Even if she’s about a hundred years older than me now or something — I still really want to.”

“It may well be quicker to contact Lilaihi at Kutou’s imperial court and have him pass on a message to his contacts in the South through official channels.” Bakaru nodded. “I’ll think on it tonight, and see what I can do. You needn’t worry. Somehow, I promise, we will find a way to reunite you with those you love.”

“You’re kind.” Arina observed. “Hikari’s fond of people in this world. If they’re like you and Kishayi-san, I understand a little more why.”

“Well, the Meihi do not fight, or harm.” Bakaru smiled. “But be careful not to trust in everyone so easily, child.”

He brushed the faded scar on his cheek.

“This is the last evidence of my slave’s life, but my time in bonds took from me my identity for long enough.” He added. “My brother died a slave. I have already told you Kaeli’s story, and Lilaihi — Hyoushin who shares an acquaintance with your friend — saw his village slaughtered, including his parents. He too lost a brother to the slavers. You must be aware that there are always wolves, no matter how numerous the sheep appear to be.”

Before Arina could respond, the door to the chamber opened once more, and Kishayi returned, a woman in tow. She was perhaps in her middle or late forties, Arina guessed, with the same pale complexion and thick silvery hair pulled back from her face in an unfamiliar style. She was robed in the same warm fabrics as her son and, as she came fully into the room, Arina noticed that she held similar garments in her hands, casting the waif and stray a smile as she approached the bed.

“So you have woken.” She said softly, in accented but clear tones. “I am glad. My name is Kaeli… it was my son who found you in the

snow."

"Pleased to meet you." Arina remembered her manners, pinkening slightly as she realised she'd once more been staring, and Kaeli's smile widened. She said something in her own tongue to Bakaru who nodded, getting to his feet.

"I will leave you in Kaeli's capable hands." He said gently. "Kishayi and I will see about preparing you some food, and then, when you're changed and you've eaten, maybe you can see a little of our village. The weather is harsh at present, but with any luck the storm will soon pass through."

With that he was gone, taking Kishayi with him, and Arina was left alone with the Meihi woman who wasted no time in setting the clothing out on the bed.

"Your people do not like snow as we Meihi do." She explained pragmatically, as she went about her task. "You were blue with cold when Kishayi bring you back here. The broth helps you not to catch cold, but if you stay here, you need warmer clothing. Outside people do not often come to Koku-zan… it is too bleak."

"It is cold." Arina admitted. "Though Kishayi-san's broth helped to warm me up. I feel better inside, Kaeli-san."

"That is good." Kaeli's eyes lit up. "Then you will let me help you change, yes? Bakaru asked me to come — but we are strangers. Will you trust me?"

Arina nodded her head.

"You people saved my life, so why wouldn't I?" She asked simply, and Kaeli laughed.

"It is not usual to be so trusting for outside of the Meihi village." She reflected. "It is true, then? You are not from this world?"

"I'm not." Arina agreed. "And I'm not usually that easily trusting of anyone or anything. But you people seem… peaceful. Friendly. I don't know what it is but… I don't think you would ever hurt anyone. It's a nice feeling. Even though I don't know really where I am or how and why I came here, I don't feel scared or lost. I don't remember coming to this mountain, but of all places to go, I suppose I could have done worse."

"Meihi always believe in helping." Kaeli agreed, as she helped her companion to change her clothing, and Arina felt the soft woven fabric slide smoothly over her cold skin. "Meihi is old word… *Me* is

tribe and *ihi* mean peace. This is how we live, and always is this way for us. The people outside… they don't always understand. But here, in Hokkan, is safe. The city of Touran where we trade is a good place. People there do not mind Meihi, and like our weaving and carving, so we can trade. And so all is well here now."

"Touran." Arina repeated thoughtfully. "Bakaru said that, too. So it's not far from here?"

"A half day walk, perhaps." Kaeli said dismissively. "No. Not so long at all."

"Half a day?" Arina's eyes almost fell out of her head, and Kaeli nodded.

"Hokkan is a very large land." She said, amused. "Of course some cities and towns are more than a week to travel to. But we do not go so far as that. Touran is usually the greatest distance any here travel to. Is a big city — the main city in Hokkan, and many live there. While you are with us, you will perhaps see it."

"I'd like to." Arina said honestly. "It sounds fun. I don't know what a city is like in this world, but I think I'd like to find out."

She ran her fingers over the bodice of her clothing.

"This is much warmer." She added. "It's totally different from the stuff that Hikari was wearing the last time she came home, though. I guess everywhere in this world has different fashions too, huh?"

"Fashions?" Kaeli looked confused.

"You know. Types of clothing."

"Well, this is Meihi clothing." Kaeli's expression cleared and she nodded her head. "We weave fabrics from wool traded at Touran from prairie sheep farmers and make cloth to wear and trade back to people in Hokkan. Meihi are best weavers in Hokkan."

"I can believe it." Arina admitted. "This is really made by hand?"

"How else would we make it?" Kaeli eyed Arina quizzically, and Arina blushed.

"I guess in my world there are several ways to weave cloth." She responded sheepishly. "Though honestly, I wouldn't have a clue how to even begin at any of them."

She got to her feet, putting a hand out to steady herself as she glanced around the chamber once more. As she did so, her eyes widened, and she reached across to touch the damp fabric of her bag.

"This…"

"It is yours?" Kaeli questioned, and Arina nodded.

"Yes." She agreed, pulling it open and glancing through the contents. "Did I bring it with me?"

"Bakaru found it in the snow when Kishayi brought you back here." Kaeli explained. "He said it looked like something from the other world and that it might be yours. I am glad he was right. You must have precious things inside."

"Precious things…" Arina's fingers closed around the spine of Suzuno's notebook, and she sighed, relief coursing through her heart. "Yes. I guess you're right."

She sighed, sinking back down on the end of her bed as she set the bag down beside her, carefully tipping the contents out onto the neatly patchworked covers.

Suzuno's diary, her cigarettes and lighter, purse, train tickets, magazine, camera and the remains of her travel snacks lay spread out before her, and she bit her lip, registering how this meagre gathering of items represented her last tie to the world in which she had spent her whole life.

"It's not much, really." She murmured. "Just this. But then, I wasn't planning to take an overnight trip."

"These are all things from your world?" Kaeli asked curiously, and Arina nodded.

"Yes." She agreed. "I really didn't know I was coming here, or I'd have brought more useful things with me."

She sighed, shoving them back into the bag and setting it down on the floor.

"I suppose it doesn't matter." She reflected. "At least if I've somehow managed to come here, I might get to see Hikari again. And that's important to me right now. I must have been dragged here for a reason, and maybe saving Hikari is it!"

The palace of Kounan was as peaceful as it was elegant.

Ouba settled herself more comfortably beneath the gazebo that stood in the centre of the Emperor's private gardens, sitting back in her seat as she cast a contented glance around her at the view. At dinner the night before, she remembered, Reizeitei's graciousness had

continued, and, on discovering her interest in flowers and perfumes, had invited her to spend as much time as she liked in the small yet perfectly planned out stretch of space. Whilst her travel companions were hard at work plotting the best route East with the help of the ever attentive Kaiga Aoiketsu, Kinka had suggested she take the chance to just relax and, though in part she felt guilty about leaving things entirely in her capable companion's hands, she knew that in matters like this she would probably be of very little use.

Besides, the journey so far had been both strange and tiring, and it was nice to just find a moment to breathe in all of the chaos.

Against the furthest wall trees bearing both plum and cherry blossom created a flash of pastel that softened the heavy green of the thickly foliaged branches, and though it was still early in the season, on the ground in clumps and clusters were tiny blossoms that Ouba had never seen before in her life. Although Kounan's summer climate was hotter in many ways than Sairou's own, the many rivers and lakes meant its atmosphere was generally more tropical than arid, and as a result, all kinds of unique and unusual greenery grew and thrived. A large proportion of Kounan's non-mountain country was covered in forestland, she knew, for Sayo had told her so as they had crossed the border. All in all it gave a picture of both peace and prosperity, and Ouba found it hard to believe that less than twenty five years earlier Kounan had been involved in a bloody and decisive war with their neighbours to the East.

Plants were a precious commodity in her own homeland, for they signified the struggle for life in an otherwise barren environment, and as she sat there, taking in Reizeitei's many beautiful trees and blossoms, she found herself thinking of her family's own private gardens. A faint sense of homesickness teased at her senses and she smiled, a wistful look entering her seiran eyes.

There was, after all, no sense in thinking about it, when she would not have an opportunity to return there for some time.

"Ouba-hime?"

At the sound of her name, the Princess turned, her smile becoming more genuine as she recognised the speaker. She had been introduced to Hikari also at the previous night's dinner, and Reizeitei had indeed called the stranger his sister, though he had not elaborated on the nature of their connection any further and she had had no occasion to ask. That Hikari was certainly younger than the Emperor had excited her own curiosity as much as it had fuelled Kinka's, and as Ouba glanced at the newcomer now, she reflected that in comparison to

Reizeitei, Hikari was quite ordinary looking in many respects.

“Am I disturbing you?” As the silence dragged on, Hikari looked anxious, and Ouba blushed, shaking her head hurriedly.

“No, not at all.” She said quickly. “I’m sorry — I didn’t mean to be unwelcoming. I suppose it’s just been a tiring few days — to sit back and relax somewhere so beautiful is a nice change.”

“Sairou’s a long way from Kounan, but Kutou’s even further still.” Hikari agreed, as the Princess moved up to make room for her companion to sit down. “No wonder you decided to take a rest here along the way.”

She smiled, her features lighting up and making her look more attractive in an instant.

“I didn’t realise you were here.” She added. “I’d forgotten that Reizeitei-sama told you about it last night at dinner, so I don’t mean to intrude on your rest time, Hime-sama. I come here a lot to clear my head between my studies — since it’s so private, it’s a nice place just to sit and think.”

“You shouldn’t concern yourself. I don’t mind your company, Hikari-sama.” Ouba shook her head. “This is your territory, after all — I am the intruder.”

“We really didn’t get an opportunity to speak last night, and I’m sorry for it.” Hikari owned. “I promised Reizeitei-sama that I’d do my bit in making you feel welcome here, but with all the political discussion going on, there wasn’t a chance to say more than a hello.”

She smiled, looking sheepish.

“You needn’t call me ‘sama’, by the way.” She continued. “It makes me feel a bit funny, if you do.”

“Really?” Ouba looked startled. “But you’re… Reizeitei-sama called you his sister, which means…”

“His sister in Suzaku, I suppose you could say.” Hikari agreed, resting her chin in her hands as she considered her companion’s words. “Yes, that’s generally how I’m known. But it’s not quite like that, Ouba-hime. So I’d rather you didn’t — if you don’t mind. I’m really bad at formality at the best of times — and there’s really no need for a proper Princess to address me in that way.”

“Sister in… Suzaku?” Ouba looked blank, and despite herself Hikari giggled.

“I’m sorry. That does sound strange.” She realised. “But you know the legends of the four Gods, don’t you? You must do, being that you are who you are.”

“I know the story of Byakko and how he protects Sairou from evil thanks to the coming of the Miko.” Ouba agreed. “Is that what you mean?”

“Yes.” Hikari nodded. “In a way, it’s that.”

She smoothed her skirt absently between her fingers, and Ouba saw the faded ink on her companion’s skin.

“You know that Reizeitei-sama is the son of Saihitei-sama, the Suzaku warrior Hotohori?” She asked.

“Yes.” Ouba smiled. “And that he purportedly takes after his father in many good ways.”

“I think that’s probably true.” Hikari acknowledged. “But you see, my father was… *is*… Tamahome. Our fathers answered Suzaku’s calling together, and for that reason, he and I share a connection. I’m really not in the least bit royal, either — but because he calls me his sister, people have taken it upon themselves to do the same.”

She looked rueful.

“My real home these days is to the west of Eiyou, in a mountain village at the foot of Reikaku-zan.” She added. “Officially I’m the responsibility of another Suzaku warrior called Chichiri, who lives as an apothecary and does what he can to help the sick in the local area.”

“I see.” Ouba’s expression cleared, and she smiled. “Then now I understand. I knew that Hotohori-sama had been slain in battle against Kutou and I had thought Reizeitei-sama to be an only child. Now it makes sense — and I appreciate your having been honest with me.”

She tilted her head on one side, eying the younger girl quizzically.

“I must ask you, then, if the other things are also true.” She added, and Hikari looked startled.

“Other…?”

“One of the maidservants mentioned something about you being highly regarded — that you have the power of the Southern God himself sealed within your heart, or some like thing.”

“Oh. That.” Hikari flushed red. “Yes. Sort of. It’s hard to explain,

but I do have Suzaku's magic. I'm still learning how to use it, though it's not out of my control these days, thank God. I'm what's called a Shinzahou… if you know what that is."

"I'm afraid I don't." Ouba confessed. "It sounds important, but it's not a word I know."

"I don't think I understand everything about it." Hikari sat back in her seat with a sigh. "But what I do know is that when I was born, Suzaku's power was sealed inside of me. Maybe before, in fact. That's why I stay in Kounan. Because of that magic. Otherwise I wouldn't be here, probably. I'd have gone… well, home."

"Home isn't Kounan?"

"No. Home is… literally… another world away." Hikari replied. "And even though I miss my family, I can't go back there. I suppose in that respect you and I have something in common, Hime-sama. You're separated from your loved ones too, aren't you?"

She grinned.

"I suppose that's why Reizeitei-sama was so keen to have me help make you feel at home." She realised. "Because I understand better than anyone what it's like to be uprooted from my family."

"Maybe he did." Ouba glanced at her companion, somehow feeling that through those few words a bond had been formed. "But then, where *is* your home? If you don't mind my asking, of course. You're a child of Suzaku's chosen, so…"

"I don't mind." Hikari shook her head. "It's no secret, after all. I was born in Tokyo, Hime. A place in the world where your Byakko no Miko came from, I guess — a long long time ago. I don't know anything about her, but I suppose she came from somewhere near where I did, originally. I came to this world to be Seiryuu no Miko in the first instance, but because of Suzaku's magic, I can't go back to that world. So I stay here. And people have, well, sort of adopted me."

She shrugged.

"It was about a year and a half or so ago, now." She concluded. "I've got used to things being the way they are."

Ouba's eyes widened in disbelief.

"From the… *other* world?" She whispered. "*Seiryuu*… no Miko?"

Hikari nodded.

"Yes." She agreed. "That's how I first met Aoi."

“I see.” Ouba pursed her lips, her mind racing as she digested this information. “Then the maid was right. You truly are a special person indeed. If you come from the Miko’s world… then you must have many many skills that people here do not. No wonder Reizeitei-sama treats you as his sister… it all makes sense now.”

“I wish it did.” Hikari laughed ruefully. “But in my world, I was just an ordinary schoolgirl. Nothing special. So I’m not used to being treated as someone important. I’m not good at learning kanji, and though I try hard, I’m having trouble picking up all of the ways people here write their letters. I’m not as accomplished as people might think, to be truthful. I’m still just Hikari, no matter how people treat me.”

Ouba was silent for a moment, considering this carefully. As she did so, she cast her companion a sidelong glance, taking in again her simple, deceptively ordinary appearance. She was not ugly, true enough, but she somehow seemed very young and innocent looking for someone who had clearly faced so many adversities and achieved so many things. No matter how casually Hikari spoke about it, Ouba knew from her father’s own court intelligence that the changes in Kutou’s political stability had been at least in part down to the raising of the God and the wishes of a Miko. Ouba had not spent much time dwelling on this part of the story, since the coming of the Miko was the accepted and expected course of things for a country in serious disarray. But that the Priestess had stayed, and more, become somehow an integral part of life at a foreign court was a new concept completely.

“Why would Seiryuu choose one of Suzaku’s people to do such a thing?” She murmured out loud, and Hikari spread her hands.

“I think it was something the Gods just decided to do, since Seiryuu’s Seishi were all dead or exiled, and Chichiri and Tasuki were on hand here to help me out when I first came.” She replied simply. “But I don’t know for sure. But I was Suzaku’s Shinzahou before I was Seiryuu no Miko. So once I stopped being the Miko, I went back to just being the Shinzahou. And that meant I had to stay in this world for good.”

“Then you truly *do* know what it is like to be taken far from home.”

“I really do.” Hikari agreed. “Though I think what you’re doing is even braver, Hime-sama. To travel so far and marry a stranger for the benefit of your people and his takes a lot of guts. I don’t think I could do that.”

“I wish I didn’t have to.” Ouba blurted out, then she reddened,

burying her head in her hands as she realised what she had said.

"Hime?" Hikari looked startled, and Ouba sighed, shaking her head.

"I don't mean that." She said at length. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say something so careless."

"It's all right." Hikari assured her. "I won't tell anyone that you said it, and if you're worried, you shouldn't bottle it up."

"I have the honour of my father and my family to think of." Ouba ran her fingers through the ends of her long hair, agitation glittering in her blue eyes. "And I can't be a coward — I *must not* let them down in any way. But… Hikari-san, you understand, don't you? That I don't want to leave everything I know to marry someone who's at least twice as old as I am. I've never even met him… and though I don't intend on running away from it, I can't pretend I'm not afraid."

"Well, anyone would be." Hikari said pragmatically. "I know that if Chichiri was having this conversation, though, he'd say it takes more courage to do something if you're scared of it than if you're not. You shouldn't worry about being afraid. I'm sure Kintsusei-sama feels the same way about it…it's as much a blind date for him as it is for you, after all."

"*Kintsusei-sama*… feels scared?" Ouba stared, and Hikari laughed, nodding her head.

"I'm sure he's worried about a lot of things right now." She agreed. "That's why he's so keen on Aoi being around to take you back, I suppose. I bet all kinds of things are going through his head. What kind of Princess you are. What expectations you will have of him. Whether you'll be able to settle down and whether it will all work out. Things like that."

"I hadn't thought about it like that." Ouba blinked. "That *he* could be scared about it, too. He's a soldier King, isn't he? And older than me. It just didn't seem to make sense."

She eyed Hikari questioningly.

"But you said you were Seiryuu no Miko, so you must have met the Emperor of Kutou, mustn't you?"

"Yes, I did." Hikari agreed. "And he's really nobody to be scared of. Even if he is a soldier — well, so is Aoi, based on his training and his background. But it doesn't make *him* harsh, does it? Kintsusei-sama is the same."

She rested her chin in her hands.

“Someone told me once that Kintsusei-sama became King because he was the only survivor after the collapse of Kutou’s government and court.” She continued. “After they fought a war with Kounan and wound up destroying themselves, he was the only Prince left. That’s the reason he hasn’t married yet — because of the war, and the fact that war makes families suffer. From what Aoi’s said, I think Kintsusei-sama doesn’t want a harem or anything like that. He wants someone he can trust in as his consort and just that. I don’t know all the details, but I think it has something to do with his own childhood or something similar, just from things Hyoushin-san said when we were all preparing to go to Shunhou. He seems… quite a lonely man, to be honest. And it’s sad, because I think… he’s really very kind, despite his country’s history.”

She smiled.

“And now he has you coming to his court.” She added. “A proper Princess with true heritage — and a really pretty one, too. Kutou’s not like Kounan. This is a true Imperial court, according to Haku-sama, but Kutou’s is still being rebuilt after all the stuff that happened. He must be worried that his country won’t meet up to what you’re used to in a peaceful land such as Sairou.”

“A lot of people have said that he’s not like his late father, whose reputation is legend across all the four lands.” Ouba said softly. “But even so, I wonder… what expectations a man in his middle thirties may have of a girl still in her teens. That he needs an heir, I understand. But I am… not sure…”

She flushed, shaking her head.

“None of this is any of your concern, Hikari-san, and I’m burdening you unnecessarily.” She said apologetically. “I do not mean to, and you need not answer me. You are very easy to talk to — that is all. I perhaps… have forgotten myself a little bit in the process.”

“Actually, maybe I have too.” Hikari admitted. “I’m talking to you as though you were a friend at school, rather than someone who’s the daughter of an Emperor. I’m sorry, Ouba-hime. I didn’t mean any disrespect.”

“I don’t find anything disrespectful in your manner.” Ouba managed a faint smile. “Between you and I, I also dislike formality where it is not necessary. Kinka and I share a very informal friendship when we are not under public scrutiny, and my sister-in-law and I are likewise. Sometimes it is hard to always live in the goldfish bowl and be forced to keep every hair in place and every step in rhythm. So you

need not apologise for being friendly. I appreciate it more than you probably know, for it helps to make me feel less homesick."

"Then it's all right, and you needn't worry about burdening me either." Hikari dimpled. "If that's how you feel about it. We are almost the same age, after all, I think. You're eighteen, aren't you, Hime?"

"Yes." Ouba agreed. "And you?"

"Seventeen, just." Hikari responded. "So there's a year between us, all in all."

"And your fiance — Kaiga Aoiketsu-dono? How many summers has he?"

"Twenty." Hikari looked surprised. "The same age as the Emperor, give or take a few months. He's older than Reizeitei-sama by maybe six months or so, I think… they're more or less of an age, though."

"I see." Ouba looked thoughtful. "It appeared to me that they had a good working relationship even despite the fact that Kaiga-dono is an emissary of Kutou's court. I suppose that accounts for it — if they are so close in age, and working so closely together."

"Aoi and Reizeitei-heika were both orphaned in the war, and their fathers were on opposite sides in a violent battle." Hikari nodded. "But fortunately for Kutou and Kounan, Reizeitei-sama wants peace with Kutou and Aoi has worked hard not to follow in his father's footsteps, either. I'm glad, because I love Aoi a whole lot. And Reizeitei-sama is someone I consider a very close friend, too. If they were at odds, it'd be difficult. As it is, though, past grievances got buried when I came to raise Seiryuu. In the end it was the only thing they could do."

"Then their connection is bound by blood?" Ouba asked interestedly, and Hikari nodded.

"You know that Saihitei-sama died protecting his people during the war, right?" She asked, and the princess nodded. "And have you also heard of Nakago — the Shougun of the East?"

"Nakago." Ouba's eyes narrowed. "A Hin, I think? With golden hair and eyes as blue as mine."

"Yes." Hikari agreed. "That Nakago. He's Aoi's father. He was the one who cut down Hotohori — Saihitei-sama — in that battle. And, in the end, my father was the one who brought down Nakago in turn. It was all a horrible, bloody time, basically. And everyone decided they didn't want to take it round again and keep old feuds going. So they didn't. And that was that."

“Kaiga Aoiketsu is a Hin?” Ouba looked startled.

“His father was.” Hikari nodded.

“But he said… he was the son of… a widowed noblewoman?”

“Sure.” Hikari agreed. “Kaiga Ruiren-sama died when he was born, and Kintsusei-sama provided for him as a result. Because he was Nakago’s son, and Nakago was Kintsusei-sama’s Commander, when he was training as a soldier.”

“Then Kaiga-dono is… not of noble blood?”

“His mother was, I think, so I guess he is.” Hikari looked thoughtful. “I really don’t know about Nakago’s past, so I’m not sure about that. But he wasn’t the son of the Kaiga lord, if that’s what you mean. He was the son of the Shougun instead. I don’t understand all of the political ins and outs of why or how. I just know that that’s what happened, because somehow Nakago’s blood had to continue in order for Seiryuu’s work to be properly seen out.”

“I hadn’t realised.” Ouba frowned. “He seems very much like a noble son to me. I have heard the name Kaiga, also — though fleetingly, it’s true. I was under the impression they were high ranking once, but maybe not?”

“They were associates of Shoukitei.” Hikari said with a shrug. “They kept slaves and did horrible stuff to people. Ruiren-sama included. I like to think that even though Nakago did bad stuff too, he still wanted to rescue Ruiren-sama and the slaves from that kind of life. There aren’t slaves in Kutou now, after all. And all of those things that happened then… are well into the past now. Ruiren-sama, Kaiga Gin and Nakago are all dead. And Aoi… is, well, Aoi. He’s noone else but that.”

She sent her companion a sidelong glance.

“Does that bother you, Hime? That he was born out of wedlock, but serves really close to the centre of court?”

“No.” Ouba shook her head slowly. “No, I don’t think so. Though in Sairou he would be debarred inheritance on those grounds, he would not be debarred high ranking position if he could prove himself adequately suited to the job. And Kaiga-dono is well-spoken and intelligent, that much is clear. More, he seems generous in his demeanour and I have no reason to slight him. I was only thinking to myself that now I know why he has those vivid blue eyes. They are Western eyes, after all. And the Hin are originally a Western clan.”

She smiled.

“There are still Hin scattered through Sairou.” She added. “Even now.”

“So when people talk of the Hin being from the far west, they really mean it.” Hikari murmured. “I didn’t know that. I thought that when Nakago’s settlement was wiped out, most of the Hin were killed or enslaved or, eventually, both. I didn’t realise that there were still Hin settlements in other countries. I guess there’s a lot I don’t know about the ShijinTenchishou still, even now.”

She spread her hands, glancing at them idly as she did so.

“In my world, there are people like the Hin, with fair colouring, blue eyes and golden hair.” She added. “But they’re very rare in my country. Most people there have dark hair and eyes, unless they have a parent or grandparent who was from somewhere else. I’ve met a few European people who look like the way people describe Nakago. And I know that we once had a language assistant in school who was from Australia — she had blue eyes even more bright than Aoi’s are.”

“Sairou has a lot of different peoples.” Ouba said pensively. “There used to be a lot of nomadic and tribal settlements dotted all over the country — different clans lived in different regions and even up to the time Byakko no Miko came, that was still true. Sairou had a civil war, then, and I think it meant a lot more people got mixed about. My own family’s origins are somewhat eclectic, due to the fact many noble and indeed royal bloodlines have married into it over the generations. Seiran eyes are not uncommon in the West — many members of my family have them, as well as the Hin, and the people who settle in the Southern region — the Yuusha. The soldier who accompanies me — Sayo— he is properly Yuusha-born, though traditionally they are probably the most mingled tribal race of all Sairou’s peoples these days. You see many people in the West with one or many Yuusha characteristics, including members of the royal class.”

“It sounds interesting.” Hikari admitted. “I have a friend who was born in the West, and she has the same colouring as you do — dark hair and dark blue eyes. I suppose I’d assumed that was the norm. And there are still all those different races? I know that the people in Kounan are pretty mixed, and because of slavery, most of the tribes in Kutou have been persecuted out of existence. I guess it’s not like that in Sairou, huh?”

“Nowadays there are still as many ethnic groups, but fewer exclusive settlements.” Ouba agreed. “It’s more a case that you can tell

someone's dominant ethnicity by their appearance… but almost everyone lives intermingled in cities and towns now. In the villages, perhaps it's still different. I don't know. I've only visited cities and only on state occasions. But I think one or two remote areas may still stick to the old traditions."

She cast Hikari a curious look.

"Have you ever been to my homeland, then? If you have a friend from the West..?"

"Yes." Hikari's eyes became clouded, and Ouba had the distinct impression she had asked a bad question. "Once, I have. But it was a long time ago — it was when I was Seiryuu no Miko, and I've not been since."

"I'm sorry." Ouba bit her lip. "I feel like I said something I should not have done."

"No… really, it's not that." Hikari held up her hands, shaking her head hastily. "It's nothing you said at all. It's just that my memories of that trip aren't so good in a lot of ways. One of my companions died during the journey… and even though I hadn't known him very long, it upset me a lot. He was… a very brave person, and too young to die. So when people talk about Sairou, I tend to think of him."

"I didn't mean to stir up a bad memory, then."

"As I said, it's not your fault. And I shouldn't let one bad experience cloud my opinion of Sairou as a whole." Hikari offered a sad smile. "The man who killed Jin is dead too, now. He's long since gone to face his maker and atone for his sins. Bad things can happen anywhere, after all. I learnt that over all things, after I came here."

"Good things too, I hope." Ouba returned the smile. "In fact, when we were coming here, we stopped in a border city called Hengei, where there was a festival going on. Maybe you know it? If you travelled into the West…"

"I think we stopped a night there, though I'm terrible with geography." Hikari admitted. "But I don't think we went to any festival."

"It's only at this time of the year." Ouba responded. "And I was eager to see it, because often it's a chance I don't get."

She frowned.

"During it, some fireworks got dropped and a cart set on fire." She added slowly. "It's strange, really. I don't actively remember a lot of

what happened next. Just that there was a small girl in danger of the flames, and so I grabbed her and pulled her out of the way. We were surrounded by flames, and I thought that we'd die…"

She sighed, shaking her head.

"Kinka chased after me, and she put herself between us and the flames." She continued. "I know that I closed my eyes, like a coward… and then, when I opened them, the fire was gone."

"Gone?" Hikari's eyes opened wide. "You mean… completely?"

"Kinka said that it was like the air was sucked out of it." Ouba nodded. "She called it a miracle from Byakko. She was luckiest, I think. It stopped only a short few inches from where she was crouching. Any closer and she'd have been hurt — and I'd have hated that. She always protects me, after all. And she swore a proper oath to my brother to keep me safe, before we left Sairou. If something happened to her because I was reckless…"

She trailed off, and Hikari's brows knitted together.

"I don't know a lot about how everything in this world works." She said at length. "But is it normal, to be able to stop fire like that? In a country where there's been God-given peace for as long as in Sairou, can Byakko do miracles and stuff like that?"

"Honestly, I don't know." Ouba shrugged helplessly. "Kinka won't talk about it, and nor will Sayo. I think they're both scared, to be honest, about how close I came to danger. I don't know if it was a divine miracle, or the protective charm my sister-in-law weaved over the pendant she gave me before we left. But I think that it means good things can happen anywhere, as well as bad. The little girl was safe, after all. And so were we. Somehow."

She folded her arms in her lap.

"It does bother me, that Kinka won't talk about it." She added. "We've never had secrets, but she's been funny since we left. There are things she's not saying… I suppose I did wonder whether or not she knew more about what happened than I do. My eyes were closed, after all. Hers weren't. Whatever it was… she was in the best position to see it."

"Or… maybe… do it?" Hikari asked softly, and Ouba's eyes widened with surprise.

"*Do* it?" She echoed, and Hikari nodded.

"Is it possible?"

"I… don't know." Ouba bit her lip. "Kinka is… a mixture of Han-ke and Kei-ke by blood. Though both are noble houses, neither of those families have magic, per se, and I've never known her to use any in all the time I've known her. She has… skills. I know this, though even I don't know how much she's been trained to do on my behalf. I just know that Rouhei, her guardian, has taught her the ways of the Han-ke, just as he learnt them and his ancestors before him. But I don't think they're anything to do with magic. Rouhei's an astrologer, after all. Not a priest or a spiritual man."

"Then maybe I'm just crazy. Ignore me. I don't know anything." Hikari grinned. "It's just… when someone wants to protect someone, it seems like in this world they can do amazing things to achieve that goal. I've seen it happen, a few times. Maybe I've even done it myself, when it came to raising Seiryuu over the palace in Kutou. So I just wondered… forget it. I'm probably wrong. And Kinka-dono would probably not like me talking about her when I barely even know her at all."

"She, Sayo and Kaiga-dono are in the palace library discussing our planned route when we leave here, though I'm in no hurry to go on yet." Ouba sighed. "You're right, she wouldn't like it if she thought I was talking about her behind her back, either. It isn't like me to doubt her, or anything like that. I suppose I don't understand, is all. Why she wouldn't tell me what it was she saw. And even if she did do it accidentally somehow — and it frightened her that she had — it wouldn't change how much I trust her. She could tell me. It would be all right."

"Some people have to tell stuff in their own time, I guess." Hikari reflected. "Or it might be there's nothing to tell. Maybe it was just some weird fluke or something. It could've been. Couldn't it?"

"Probably." Ouba's fingers strayed to the tree-character pendant that hung at her throat. "And we really should not discuss it in this manner any more."

She looked embarassed.

"You truly *are* easy to talk to, Hikari-san." She added softly. "I never confide in people so easily as this on such a brief acquaintance. Even though we've just met… I can tell you're a good person. And an honest one. I've always been a good judge of character, even if I'm foolish in other respects. And I am certain that had we longer to spend together here, we might even become friends."

"Well, there's one way around that." Hikari reflected, getting to her

feet. “To be honest, I don’t like that Aoi’s going away again as soon as he’s got back from one trip, because lately I feel like I’ve hardly seen him. Plus, my friend from Sairou lives in Kutou now. Maybe if I spoke to Reizeitei-sama, I could convince him to let me accompany you as far as Kintsusei-sama’s court. People in Kutou think I’m some kind of deity, which is embarrassing, but I would like to see Myoume again. So I could ask — it might be fun to go East.”

“Would they let you, considering what you are to the South?” Ouba looked startled. “Not that I’d object, but you are surely someone who needs special protection…”

“I have faith in Aoi to do that, if I need it.” Hikari shook her head. “Besides, I have a better understanding of my magic now than I did when I was Seiryuu’s Miko. And like I said, I partly belong to Kutou too, now. I’m going to marry an Easterner, after all. It was their God I called on, not Suzaku, in the end. And I’d like to see how the East is progressing. I’m sure Chichiri wouldn’t mind, if I wanted to go… I’m practically an adult in my own right, after all. And… to be honest, I’ve been worrying about Myoume some lately. She’s having a baby soon, and for some reason it’s been on my mind. So to have an excuse to travel would be nice… if you don’t have any objections to it.”

“None whatsoever.” Ouba smiled, relief flickering in her heart. “I’d like it a lot, to be honest. It might seem a little less frightening, if Reizeitei-sama and your guardian would consent.”

“I’ll ask. They can only say no.” Hikari said philosophically. “Aoi is the one who’ll probably want to refuse, so I won’t ask him till I’ve cleared the Emperor and Chichiri first. If they say it’s all right, he’s overruled, after all.”

An impish look glittered in her hazel eyes.

“I’ve learnt that sometimes not giving him a choice is the best option, else he’d protect me far too much.” She added. “I think it’s the Seishi blood in him, or something.”

“To marry for love must be a great thing indeed.” Ouba said wistfully, and Hikari nodded.

“I think so.” She agreed. “But you shouldn’t look like that, Ouba-hime. I know Kintsusei-sama is a good person, and I think you’ll find that you’ll become friends, even if love is a big thing to ask of strangers. This world has two main types of powerful men — those who’ll hurt a girl and those who’ll go out of their way not to. Kintsusei-sama is the latter. He won’t do anything bad to you. I’m almost one hundred percent sure of it.”

Her eyes twinkled.

“So I’ll speak to the Emperor.” She concluded. “And see if he has any objections to me travelling to Kutou after all this time!”

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Writer’s note:

Shunhou (春封) *is the name of Kutou’s capital city. No, I didn’t make it up. Yes. Really* ^_^.

Chapter 4

Chapter Three

The child had not stirred once.

Geiyo Anara sat herself down at the bedside, reaching across to brush the small, pale fingers gently. Now, as the girl's breathing had steadied, she seemed almost peaceful, but Anara knew enough about children's reactions to know that it was a false calm. Something had happened in the desert — something which had terrified the youngster enough to make her flee as though wild animals were at her heels. Even now there were still faint traces of red around her eyes and across her cheeks, the tell-tale signs of a violent storm of tears.

When the village children had banged on her door, all of them talking at once as they tried to explain what had happened in excited, eager voices, Anara had not anticipated anything out of the ordinary. The local youngsters were, she knew, an adventurous sort, and it was not uncommon for one of them to fall from the lower branches of a tree, or bang their head in a scramble to get to the village boundaries first.

However, as soon as she had set eyes on the pale-faced, grimy young girl, she had realised that something more was at work. Far from being one of the familiar faces she saw day in and day out, this child was a stranger, and more, from her grimy, skinny appearance, she was most likely an orphan who had been running wild around the mountainous, desert terrain for some time. She had seemed to weigh next to nothing as Anara had lifted her in her arms, a strong sense of maternal protection washing over her as she had brought the stray back to her family's farm. As one of the village apothecaries, she knew that the children had come to her and her husband for help. But something in the child's pitiful, crumpled appearance had sparked a memory inside her of another young girl who, on occasions, had needed comforting after a particularly vicious vision.

Her daughter Myoume was fully grown now, she knew, and married, living in a far off land with, she hoped, happy news soon to be on the horizon. The days of tears and terror had long since passed, but Anara remembered them keenly enough to know that whatever had upset this stranger, more than anything she wanted to help the child work it out.

Whilst her husband had seen to the various other minor needs of villagers during the afternoon, Anara had taken the young straggler into the back room of the farmhouse, carefully peeling the dusty, mud-caked clothing from her young body and washing her thoroughly from head to toe. The child had not made even so much as a murmur during this, and as Anara had robed her in one of Myoume's old night gowns, carefully and painstakingly brushing out the thick black hair into a more manageable tail, the village woman had noticed something which had almost made her drop the brush in alarm.

It had been there only for the briefest moment, and so faint that Anara had thought she might have imagined it ever having been there before. And yet, something deep inside her told her that she had not. Shimmering on the girl's breast, just bright enough to shine even through the light fabric of the gown, had been the unmistakeable trace of a white character.

Anara sat back, pursing her lips as she considered.

"Byakko-kami-sama." She murmured, glancing up at the ceiling as if by some miracle she could make the tiger hear her prayer. "What are you asking of me now, then? And why… in a child such as this, *why*?"

As though she had heard Anara's words, at this, the girl's eyelashes twitched slightly, and her lips parted as she let out an incoherent murmur. Anara was immediately alert, taking the child's hand more tightly in her grip as she reached across to brush the youngster's forehead. She was not hot, she realised with relief. Exhausted and frightened she may have been, but she did not seem to have developed a fever from her exertions across the desert.

"Can you hear me?" She asked softly, and at this, the girl's eyelashes fluttered again, this time opening slightly to reveal a pair of vivid, if bewildered blue eyes.

As she blinked, bringing Anara into focus, she suddenly seemed to realise that she didn't know where she was, and she started, pulling her hand away from the woman's grip. She struggled into a sitting position, staring at her rescuer in fear and dismay.

"Who are you?" She demanded, pulling her covers around her as she shuffled back against the wall like a cornered wild animal. "Where am I? What are you doin' to me? Why am I here?"

"Shh." Anara held up her hands in a conciliatory gesture. "It's all right. You're not in any danger here. This is Shouki-mura, and I'm Geiyo Anara, one of the village apothecaries. You collapsed in our

village, and so the local children came to get me. They were worried you were injured or sick, and so I brought you here."

"Shouki… mura?" The child repeated the two words blankly, then, "I don't remember."

"There's no hurry for you to." Anara assured her. "Sit back and relax. I won't hurt you. I promise."

"What am I wearing…?" The girl glanced down at herself, fingering the fabric with a startled look in her eyes. "And… my hair… what did you do?"

"I had to bathe you, in order to find out if you had any injuries." Anara admitted. "But nothing else, I promise. You don't need to be afraid of me. I only want to help you find your way home."

"Home." The girl's eyes shadowed, and Anara had the impression that shards of memory had begun to return to her. She shook her head. "If that's it, I ain't got one. So you shouldn't bother. I live where I want to, after all."

"You don't have a family who might be looking for you?"

"Nope." The girl shook her head, black tail of hair swinging. "My Ma died of plague when I was small, an' Pa was killed in a brawl seven years ago. Since then, I've taken care of myself. I'm not a baby, after all. I can manage. I don't need help from some strange apo… appo… whatever you said woman in some village I've never been to."

Despite herself, Anara found herself smothering a smile at the girl's spunk, and at her reaction, the youngster's eyes narrowed.

"Don't laugh at me." She snapped. "It's not funny. It's true. I don't need anyone's help. Or your help. Or anything else. I can manage on my own, so get out of my way!"

With that she pushed Anara's hands aside, scrambling out of bed as she resolutely made for the door. As soon as she tried to bear her own weight, however, she stumbled, and Anara darted forward, catching her before she could fall headlong.

"You're probably hungry, if nothing else." She said gently, as the girl wriggled free of her grasp. "And you could do with a longer sleep, since you were clearly exhausted when you got here. I think you must've come a long way — so at least let us feed you and provide you with somewhere to rest tonight. Tomorrow, it's up to you what you do. But whether you're used to taking care of yourself or not, I'd worry if I let you go out to find your own food when you can barely

even stand."

The girl eyed her suspiciously for a moment, and Arina smiled, sitting down on the bed.

"Will you at least tell me your name?" She asked softly. "You know mine, after all. And I can't keep calling you 'you'. Can I?"

The girl's eyes narrowed, as if she was considering the situation carefully. Then she sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

"Haruka." She said abruptly. "Mai Haruka. Not that that matters, since there ain't no Mai family left anywhere 'cept me these days. I told you, if you think you can sneak round finding my folks, you'll have no luck. They're all bones an' dust now. Nowt else but that."

"And how old are you, Haruka?"

"Dunno, really." At this the girl paused, surprise entering her expression. "I can't really remember… twelve, maybe. Perhaps thirteen. Somethin' like that. Pa was never quite sure either, t'be honest. Ma used to know all the things like that, he'd say. When we were born, an' all. But I think… somethin' like that."

Despite herself, Anara's eyes widened.

"You've been on your own since you were five or six?" She asked, and Haruka shrugged.

"Guess so, if that adds up." She acknowledged. "I told you. I'm not a baby. I can manage on my own, and I do."

She sighed, stifling a yawn.

"I am tired, though." She admitted. "Dead tired. I must've run forever."

"The village children thought you seemed scared… and when I brought you back here, it looked like you'd been crying." Anara observed, watching her companion's reaction for any sign of discomfort or dismay. "Did something happen to frighten you, in the mountains? I know that sometimes wolves and even bears sometimes roam that far, if it's a dry season and they can't find food elsewhere. That's one of the things that worried me… that you might have been attacked by a wild animal out there."

Haruka stiffened, and Arina was taken aback by the darkness that suddenly clouded the girl's blue eyes.

"Nothing." She said flatly. "And even if it did, it wouldn't be your business."

“I was only concerned about you, that’s all.”

“Then don’t ask questions about shit an’ we’ll be fine.”

Despite herself, the young girl’s voice shook slightly, and Arina sighed, shaking her head.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.” She said gently. “You’re still shaken up, and you need to be resting. Will you trust me, Haruka, at least enough to stay here until tomorrow? Whatever happened, as an apothecary and as a mother, I can’t let you risk your life out in the cold desert at night. Not in this state. Please. Humour me.”

Haruka eyed her carefully for a moment. Then she pursed her lips.

“What exactly is an appy… thickary, anyway?” She asked slowly, and Arina smiled.

“An apothecary? Someone who grows herbs and dispenses them as medicines to people who are sick or in pain.”

“I see.” Haruka seemed to be reasoning this out carefully in her own mind. “So, cures and stuff? Things like that?”

“Yes. Sleeping medicines. Pain medicines. Things to lower fevers and bring relief.”

“Hrm.” Haruka chewed on her lip for a moment, then, “When Ma was first sick, I think Pa went to a… a… apothecary. I remember her screamin’ a lot, at times, an’ that she had a real bad fever for ages. Pa said it was a sickness not even a God could cure. But whatever he got for her, it stopped her screamin’. So I think it helped her.”

She smiled slightly.

“Adults usually chase me out of places, or they want to cause trouble for me somehow.” She added. “But if you’re one of them people, maybe you’re different. Just, people in villages an’ shit don’t usually understand, when you haveta feed yourself an’ noone else’ll do it for you. So they get mad, and stuff.”

“I’m not going to get mad with you about anything.” Anara assured her. “I haven’t any reason to, after all. We’ve only just met, Haruka-chan. Why would I hate you based on only a short meeting?”

“Most people do it when they look at me.” Haruka said frankly, and Anara saw a haunted look enter her eyes. “Because I’m on my own. They have lots of bad words for what kids like me are. And then… there’s…”

She bit her lip, shaking her head.

“Nothing.” She said softly. “It doesn’t matter.”

Anara frowned, eying Haruka keenly.

“Haruka, do you have… maybe… some kind of magic, too?” She asked softly, and at the question Haruka’s head shot up, horror and alarm in her bright blue eyes.

“Why would you ask me that?” She demanded. “I’m just a desert kid. What would I know about magic and stuff?”

Arina smiled, reaching over to touch Haruka gently on the shoulder.

“Because I saw something, when I bathed you.” She said quietly. “Something that I’ve seen only twice before in my life. And both those individuals… both of them had magic because of it. So I thought… maybe you had some too.”

Haruka shook herself free of Anara’s touch, twisting her fingers together as she lowered her gaze.

“I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.”

“I think you do.”

“Are you callin’ me a liar, then?” Haruka demanded, and Anara spread her hands.

“I didn’t say that.” She said carefully. “But even so, I think you do know what I mean, even if you’re not ready to talk about it yet. And so it’s all right — I won’t ask you anything else right now. You’re tired and you need to rest. We’ll discuss anything else when you’re feeling better.”

“I’m fine.” Haruka’s expression became stubborn, and Anara smiled.

“What would you like to eat?” She asked lightly. “My husband won’t be back from Eiroku till later this afternoon, most likely, so it’s only you and I here at the moment. Whether you’re fine or not, I’m sure you must be hungry.”

Haruka shot her a startled look, and Anara saw a slight faltering in the girl’s tough, defensive shell.

“Why do you want to help me?” She murmured. “Really, why? Why would you give me your food and let me into your house…? Even being an apothy..thingy doesn’t mean you have to do stuff like that. I don’t understand. Why?”

“Why…” Anara pursed her lips. “Aside from the desire to help

someone in trouble?"

"Noone really is that way, so there must be another reason."

"You've really come up against some rough times, haven't you, Haruka-chan? If you think everyone in the world is out for themselves."

"They are." Haruka chewed on her lip. "Me too. To survive, you have to. If you don't, you die. That's the rule. It's how it works. You're older'n me so you must know it too. So tell me. Why do you want to help me? I ain't stupid. I want to know."

Anara smiled.

"I suppose, when I saw you lying on the ground, it reminded me of something else." She admitted, coming to sit down beside the young stray on the well-worn blankets that stretched across the bed. "I have a daughter too, you see, though these days she lives a very long way away. I had a son, too, once, but he's long since gone to face Byakko's judgement. These days my husband and I manage this place alone, and though I know that Myoume went East to marry and start a family, sometimes the farm seems quiet. Perhaps that's why, above all other things."

She got to her feet, casting the girl a pensive glance.

"Well?" She pressed. "If you're feeling up to it, why don't you come and help me prepare something to eat in the kitchen? You're a girl of the world so you must know how to gut fish and I'd just come back from the fish market when the children came to get me, so there's plenty of fresh. How does that sound?"

Despite herself, Haruka's eyes lit up, and Anara grinned, seeing a hint of the young girl flicker in the back of her companion's vivid gaze.

"I guess… I could." She said slowly, but Anara was not fooled by the child's pretence at reluctance. "After all, I am good at guttin' fish. An'…I guess… I am… hungry. But even if I do, it don't mean that I'm not gonna take off or anythin'. I don't belong to anyone, an' I don't need grown ups tellin' me how to survive. So don't think that you can, okay? Even if you are an apothy cary. I ain't your daughter an' I ain't gonna try an' be — so keep it in mind, huh?"

"It's understood." Anara said solemnly, holding out a hand to her companion. "Well? If that's the case, the kitchen awaits."

“I wonder how Ouba’s getting on.”

Sashi glanced at her reflection in the mirror, absently touching the tree pendant around her throat as she turned to meet her husband’s gaze. “She must have reached Kounan by now, I’m sure — has there been any word from any of the envoys about her arrival?”

“This morning, Father had a missive from his embassador to Kounan’s court.” Nefuru nodded, coming to rest his hands on his wife’s shoulders. “As you say, Ouba has reached Kounan. Kinka and Sayo too, and all in good health. It’s a relief to know she’s got at least that far — knowing how treacherous the desert is to travel through.”

“That’s why you took the precautions you did of disguising her as an ordinary merchant’s daughter.” Sashi reminded him. “And Sayo is a good soldier. I’m sure that he would’ve been equal even to the most violent of rogues crossing the border. After all, you avoided the path through the mountains where Kounan’s legendary sanzoku hunt, didn’t you? I remember you consulting Rouhei many times about the safest path to take.”

“Yes, I know.” Nefuru let out his breath in a rush, shaking his head. “Sashi, it’s strange, but… I’m almost relieved to know that she made it safely across Sairou’s border and as far as the Southern capital. Kounan is peaceful and has powerful protection in the form of Suzaku’s surviving guardians and even, if the rumours are to be believed, some other divine force even stronger than that those men blessed by the God possess. That being the case, I’m sure that from hereon in her trip will be fine. And it makes me glad to know it, even though I miss her being here.”

“Nefuru?”

At the tone in her companion’s voice, Sashi paused, eying him in consternation. “You sound preoccupied — is there something you’re concealing from me?”

“Concealing?” Nefuru frowned, and Sashi sighed, linking her arm in his as she led him towards the door of the chamber.

“You always do this.” She scolded. “Matters of state are things that you think, as Crown Prince, you ought to bury deep inside of yourself and hope that noone notices. You can’t be strong all the time, Nefuru, and I know better than most what that girl means to you. You’re worried about something, and I’m your wife. At least do me the courtesy of trusting me with your concerns.”

“I’m sorry.” Nefuru rubbed his temples, shooting her a rueful

glance. “I wasn’t going to say anything quite simply because I don’t know what to say. It’s just something that Rouhei told me… something he saw in the star charts. From what Kinka said, too, before she left — it seems more than likely Rouhei’s predictions are correct. But even so, I’m finding it hard to fathom. I don’t understand it. It just worries me all the more because of that fact, too. I can’t put my finger on anything.”

“You’re not enlightening me any, talking in riddles.” Sashi told him bluntly, stepping out into the sunshine and turning to make sure he followed her. “So we’ll go to the gardens and talk it through. All right? Rouhei’s predictions are often accurate, true enough, but they’re not grounded in any kind of spiritual power. A gifted astrologer he might be, Nefuru, but he’s not guaranteed to always be correct. And whatever it is he thinks he’s seen, well, if it bothers you that much then it bothers me, too.”

Nefuru sighed heavily.

“I suppose you have a point.” He acknowledged, as they made their way through the gilted gates that led into the private royal gardens. “You know, Ouba came here so often, when she was here. I almost expect to see her step out from behind a tree or a bush at any moment. It’s odd to know that she isn’t in Sairou any more — and that she’s far out of my reach.”

“Yet even so, and even though the parting hurts you, you’re glad and relieved at it?” Sashi guided him down onto one of the carved seats, sinking down beside him and arranging her skirts more carefully across her knees as she eyed him quizzically. “That doesn’t make sense, even for you. You’ve been against Ouba’s going to Kutou since your Lord Father first raised the idea. And now you’re glad of it? What’s changed?”

“Nothing, maybe.” Nefuru sat back against the hard wood, gazing up at the mottled, cloud-dotted sky. “Sashi, how much faith do you have in Byakko’s protection over this land?”

“Byakko’s…?” Sashi stared. “What is this? First Ouba, now you! Are all of the Royal House of Sairou doubting in their guardian deity now?”

“No, it isn’t that.” Nefuru shook his head. “Wait… did you say Ouba said something too?”

“Just that she wondered how much Byakko was really protecting people here, when there was still poverty and drought and when she needed to go to a foreign land in order to secure basic trade

agreements with a former enemy." Sashi responded. "I hadn't heard her speak like that before, and now you… Nefuru, tell me. What's going on?"

"Probably it's a coincidence, since Ouba knows nothing of any of this." Nefuru responded acidly. "Obviously, from your reaction, you still have all the faith of the Ueke in Byakko's guidance."

"Of course." Sashi touched the pendant at her throat. "The cult of Kitora is as strong as ever in the North. It gives people comfort and faith, Nefuru, even if it's not a tangible form of worship. Kitora is Byakko's representative who is here on his behalf when he cannot be here himself. Byakko's summoning happened but once in our history, after all. But even though he can't directly touch us, he's still there, watching over us. And if we need his help, Kitora will rise from her sleep and heed our call. This is the cornerstone of the North Sairou faith, and even living so many years in Arudo at the palace hasn't weakened it within me."

Nefuru offered her a faint, crooked smile.

"It gives me comfort when you speak with such resolution." He admitted. "Even though I don't belong to the Ueke's cult or totally understand the charms and spells you cast in her name, Sashi, your faith has always bolstered me in times when I've doubted or questioned anything. This time, I hope it will do so again. It may be pitiful to rely so much on my consort in times like this, but sometimes I feel there is noone else I can turn to without creating a political situation."

"That's why I'm here in the first place." Sashi told him comfortably. "Your Lord Father wanted you to have a bride who could be that kind of support if and when you needed her to be. And so I am. Talk to me, Nefuru. Tell me what's on your mind. What has Rouhei been saying now?"

Nefuru sighed, running his fingers through his thick dark hair.

"Rouhei believes that the stars have entered a unique series of positions of late." He said slowly. "And that there's only once before in Sairou's history when those particular constellations have acted in this way. That was the time when the door to the other world opened and the Miko came to save Sairou from its destruction."

"The Miko…" Sashi's eyes widened, and Nefuru nodded.

"He believes that it might be an omen for danger." He agreed grimly. "Though our government is stable and there is no threat of

contest to Father's throne or even my position, it makes me uneasy. Rouhei made it clear that he doesn't think that its as simple as a civil uprising. Those things we can defeat, should we need to. There's no disloyalty at court, I'm certain of that, and with people like him and Sayo, any opposition would find it hard to gain support. After the dissolution of the Kei rebellion, noone has tried to contest major power in Arudo since."

"If all of that is true, then why would he say such a thing?" Sashi asked softly, apprehension in her eyes, and Nefuru spread his hands.

"All I know is that, blunt as he can occasionally be in his opinions, Rouhei is not a man to lie." He said evenly. "Nor is he one to blow things out of proportion. I think he strongly believes that Sairou is about to face danger once again. What nature that danger takes, he doesn't know for sure. But he did make… suggestions to me that concern me greatly. Suggestions which, even here in the gardens, I don't feel safe in voicing aloud."

He sighed.

"Suffice it to say he told me in no uncertain terms that Ouba being out of this country at this time was the best thing." He concluded. "For her to be going to Kutou, where there is newly peace… is actually a better idea than her being here in Sairou, or some such thing."

"I don't believe it." Sashi whispered. "What you're saying is… that Rouhei believes… that Sairou is once more going to crumble? And that… that something… terrible is going to sweep its way across this land again?"

"There's one more thing." Nefuru agreed soberly. "He spoke of chosen people, Sashi. People of Byakko's blood and even that there are already those who walk this land who bear the white mark of the Tiger on their skin. His meaning is beyond all doubt. He believes that the situation is severe enough for Byakko to call another Miko. And that the chosen of Byakko — the seven stars which make up the unsettled constellations in the Western sky… that they will once more be called to arms in Sairou's name."

Sashi bit her lip, absorbing this with a mixture of dismay and disbelief.

"Another Miko." She murmured. "And Seishi? Chosen people? A disaster of that magnitude? When Sairou is so stable and at peace? I don't understand."

“Nor do I, fully.” Nefuru admitted. “No matter what things Rouhei said to me, I find it hard to visualise things being the way he thinks they are.”

“And you won’t tell me what those things are?”

“Here, in the gardens, no.” Nefuru shook his head. “I’m sorry, Sashi… but it’s something which, for now, must remain just between him and I.”

“I see.” Sashi’s eyes narrowed. “Are you planning on dispatching him, then, in some way that most of the court would not approve of?”

“At the moment, no.” Nefuru responded. “If he’s right, I doubt it will come to that. Still, I can say that he did intimate to me that he was certain of the awakening of stellar warriors. And more, when she came to swear her oath to me, Kinka let slip that she’d even seen such a mark. She wouldn’t tell me any more about it then, and Rouhei hasn’t said anything specific, either. But I have a feeling that both of them know more about this than we do, even now.”

He shrugged.

“And we all know more than Father, since as yet I don’t know how or if to broach it with him.” He added helplessly. “To not tell the Emperor may be seen as treason, yet we have no firm proof. Whoever this person is who bears Byakko’s mark, they haven’t come forward to show it. If it wasn’t that someone like Rouhei was so convinced…”

“As you say, Rouhei is not one to unecessarily create chaos and disturbance.” Sashi sighed heavily. “For him to speak like this to you, he must truly believe in it. And if he says he saw something… he and Kinka both… I don’t think either are witnesses whose word we can doubt. Do you?”

“No.” Nefuru shook his head. “Kinka swore to me in blood without hesitation her loyalty to Sairou’s throne, denouncing her Father and his rebellion viciously as she did so. But even despite her oath, she did not want to tell me where she had seen the mark. And it means that even if I wanted to do something, I don’t know what I could do.”

“You think that it’s someone at court, don’t you?” Sashi asked softly, and Nefuru nodded.

“That is my way of thinking.” He agreed. “Someone with whom Rouhei has a connection, no doubt, for him to have formulated such a theory.”

“Kinka too.” Sashi reminded him. “Which means whoever it is is

likely connected to the Han-ke."

"Yes, I had that thought too." Nefuru sighed. "But that is difficult, too. Rouhei's older brother serves as Lord for the Han-ke, but he has not been here these past few months except for the odd ceremonial occasion. The Han-ke is a large and powerful family spread across the Western and Southern Provinces, these days. But Rouhei aside, there are few, if any Han-ke serving directly at court. Certainly none are in such a close position to the Imperial throne as Rouhei or his brother, and I can't…"

"Then you should ask Rouhei himself." Sashi said sensibly. "He knows his clan better than you do, and if he has insider knowledge, he's sworn by oath to disclose important information to you. This is important. Even family loyalty can't make him conceal it."

She eyed him thoughtfully.

"You don't think it's Rouhei himself, do you?" She asked, and Nefuru started, then shook his head.

"No." He said frankly. "I think if it had been, he'd have told me openly. I got the impression more that it was someone he felt the need to protect. Rouhei can be secretive and slick but he's usually so on my orders and for my benefit. I don't think that, if it was him, he would have kept it from me."

"Rouhei is unmarried, and has no children." Sashi's eyes narrowed. "So immediate family in a sense doesn't exist. However…"

"However?"

"Maybe you're looking at it wrong." Sashi folded her hands in her lap, offering him a faint smile. "There's one person who Rouhei has *always* protected. He's done so to the point of going into a den of treason and heresy and extracting her, without knowing whether or not he would be fostering someone who would grow up to commit the same crimes against the throne. He's trained her in all the dark arts of the Han-ke as well as taken her under his wing and seen to it that she's integrated and accepted in high society despite her past. One person over all others, Nefuru, who Rouhei risked being disowned to protect. You know as well as I do that when his family declared Kei Engai nothing to do with them or their clan, he was the only one who sought to bring Kinka to safety and rehabilitate her as one of the Han-ke."

"*Kinka*?" Nefuru's eyes almost fell out of his head. "You think… that the chosen person… is Kinka herself?"

“Well, it would explain why Rouhei was so keen to face his brother and stand up for the child.” Sashi said sensibly. “Think about it. By marriage, Kei Engai had Han connections. Kinka’s mother was cousin to both Rouhei and the current Han-ke Lord, but we both know she was raised at the main house and was like a sister to them both. All of the Han-ke were against her marrying into the Kei-ke when it happened, and till her father’s treason, Kinka had no connections with the Han-ke at all. Then, out of the blue, whilst all forces imaginable are hunting down the Lord of the Kei manor, Rouhei steps in and decides to bring Engai’s daughter to court. Rouhei, who has no wife or children of his own, nor ever shown any inclination for them, suddenly chooses to raise a young girl. Throughout all of Engai’s exile and until his execution, Rouhei stood up for Kinka’s rights against his brother and his family. If not for his association with you, he might well have been discarded by the clan completely on several occasions. Yet he persisted. He pressed Kinka into Ouba’s service. He made a respectable lady of her. And he severed her loyalty to the Kei-ke completely by his kindness and determination. Wouldn’t it make sense to you, Nefuru, that he did so because he knew the child he was protecting was special?”

Nefuru’s brows knitted together.

“Perhaps I need to address this with him directly.” He admitted. “I had not thought of it, but your reason makes sense. Except that… Rouhei was adamant that Kinka should go with Ouba to Kutou. Why, if she truly is one of Byakko’s people, would he do such a thing?”

“That’s obvious.” Sashi shrugged. “Because Ouba-hime is this court’s most precious jewel, of course. And Rouhei is your friend as well as your subordinate. He knows what that girl means to you and to everyone else. He probably felt that, trained as she is, if Kinka is one of Byakko’s people, she’s obviously best placed to protect the Princess from harm. Once Ouba is in Kutou, if the need arises, Kinka can always be recalled to court here in Arudo. But if I had to make a decision regarding such a long and dangerous journey guarding such a precious cargo, I would want the God’s help too.”

“I suppose so.” Despite himself, a smile touched Nefuru’s lips, and at the sight of it, Sashi laughed, grasping her husband loosely by the hands.

“As usual, you need me to point out the obvious.” She teased, though she knew that her light tone hid the deeper concerns Nefuru’s words had stirred within her heart. “Talk it over with Rouhei. If danger is coming to Sairou, then Byakko won’t let us down. He will

protect us. All of us. I have faith in that, Nefuru. You must have it too, for the people may need to see it. They look up to you a great deal, after all."

"They do." Nefuru agreed. "And you're right. I will speak to Rouhei about our suspicions. But not right this instant. Right this instant I want to go to Byakko's shrine, light a taper and make a prayer to the God for Ouba's continued safety and protection on her journey. I think I should, since I've been so disgracefully doubting of late. It seems we're going to need him in good humour, after all."

"I'll come with you." Sashi decided. "Two prayers are stronger than one, after all. And if Sairou is in danger, the sooner we reach out to him the better. He'll already know, if there is something we need to do. The quicker we look to him for guidance, maybe the sooner we can solve things and prevent the tragedies of a century ago."

So, Byakko had anticipated her coming.

In the hollow of a dead plum tree's gnarled trunk, a shadowy presence observed the Prince and his consort as they made their way towards the path that led to the royal shrine of Byakko. Despite herself, a flicker of amusement flared within her. So they intended to pray, did they? To ask Byakko for deliverance? As ever, they were fools.

However, she had to make plans for herself, too. As she spread her dark aura throughout the tree's carcass, the apparition turned her mind back to the confrontation in the mountain cave, and despite herself, anger twitched at her senses.

A child, yet she had not been able to muster the strength to kill her. Half-formed and weak, and unaware of her full potential, the girl had been lured to the cave Byakko's seishi had once considered precious and Makiko had been certain that it had been underlying memory that had brought her there.

From her position within the seal of the cave, Makiko had overheard the dying Toroki make her prophesy to Subaru, and it had filled her with both hope and resolution that one day, no matter how long that day would take to come, she would have her chance to wreak revenge over Sairou's people and their protectors one by one. Her curse had killed them, sure enough. But even though she had taken pleasure in the slow suffering of first Amefuri then Toroki, it had not given her her freedom.

And in the intervening years, some foreign force had broken

Tenkou's hold, weaking Makiko's soul irretrievably as the dark, forbidden magic had been wrenched away from her.

She was little more than a spirit now, she knew that. Held together by her own hatred and steely resolve as much as she was the paltry spells and incantations she had learnt as a young girl at Kutou's court. She was a literal shadow of her former self, and she hated it. Over the generations she had spent sealed beneath the gems that marked out Byakko's stars, her resentment had slowly grown and mutated within her, darkening her spirit yet further as over and over again she relived one at a time the humiliations she had suffered against Byakko's people.

And yet, Toroki's prediction still resonated within her. That it was not over, and that one day, someday, she would come to be free. That belief above all others had kept her strong, and, knowing that there was no end to death, she had settled herself to wait for the moment when Subaru returned to the cave.

But Subaru had not come. Even when Toroki had submitted herself to her God and given up her life within the cave, the time-shifter had not returned. Instead it had been her companion, the irritatingly cocky one known as Tokaki who had come to Kumo-zan, taking Toroki's remains, blessing them and burying them on the mountain. Subaru had taken the warning seriously, then. That realisation had made Makiko angrier than ever, especially when she had realised the power this woman held had enabled her, in some respects, to override the effects of the curse. Makiko had strongly expected to feel the despair and death of each of Byakko's people pollute the cave as one by one they gave in to their demons. Yet Subaru's spells had protected not only her but Tatara, the guardian of the Shinzahou, and Tokaki himself. And from her place in Byakko's prison, Makiko had been unable to counter Subaru's spell. Byakko's people had therefore lived, despite her hopes. But though Subaru had survived past a century, she had never returned to Kumo-zan. And consequently, Makiko had remained a prisoner inside the Spider's Peak.

A prickle went through her aura, as she contemplated the unfairness of this fact. When, a few years earlier she had felt the twitching presence of first Toroki then Amefuri enter the mountains, she had been further incensed. Yet she had been helpless to do anything about it. Without Tenkou's power, she could not even attempt to counter the seal. All she could do was wait for Subaru's spirit to rise again. And hope that somehow, someday, her luck would change.

And then, somehow, it had.

The storms that had wracked the desert land had cut through the mountains, striking into the heart of the stony ridge that surrounded the immense Kumo-zan and sending shock waves deep into its heart. The cracks that had begun to split the cave roof had dislodged two of the gems belonging to Amefuri's constellation, and for the first time in over a century Makiko felt the seal begin to weaken. And then, as if called by some divine force, Subaru had returned to the cave.

But it had not been the Subaru she remembered. Too much time had passed, and old age had claimed the Seishi that had so infuriatingly overcome her curse to live a long and useful life. The girl who now held that one's soul deep within her body was nothing more than a desert rat scrambling from cave to cave, and even despite the loss of Tenkou's magic, Makiko had seen her chance to slay one of Byakko's chosen right away. After all, the girl's power was clearly far from being fully awakened, and she was only a child — surely not one who could fight against one of her intelligence and long experience.

Still, child or not, Subaru had still been Subaru, and she had still foxed Makiko's hex. The apparition twitched and shuddered at the thought, impatience running through her. A normal human was a useless weapon, and she had no power of her own. Though she had followed her old paths to the palace she had once walked through with such authority and pride, she had no idea what should be her next step. A spirit could drift from place to place for all eternity without being noticed, she knew that. And yet, if Byakko was already mobilising his people, she also knew deep within her heart that a battle was coming. That somehow, once more, she would find the strength she so craved and become the demon she had once been.

At this thought, she pushed her energy up through the branches of the tree, engulfing it completely in her darkness as little by little the wood she inhabited began to blacken and curl beneath her touch.

To start with, she knew, she needed a more convenient place to discover information than this. As she considered this thought, she remembered the royal couple's discussion once more, and humour twitched at the edge of her senses.

"*The Ueke, huh.*" The whisper floated through the deserted garden like the twist of the wind wrapping itself around the branches of the nearby trees. "*Funoki… Kitora's people. So much to the good. A princess who casts charms and spells is as good a place as any to start my quest. Patience, Makiko. Your time will come. For now, first things first. A body… a body that has some spiritual ability and one which can act as a*

weapon on my behalf."

She surged up through the tree, hovering in the sky above the garden as she watched Nefuru and his companion disappear into Byakko's shrine, and satisfaction settled itself inside of her.

"*Yes.*" She reflected. "*This Sashi-hime will serve my purpose very well.*"

Chapter 5

Chapter Four

"I still don't understand why you want to go with her."

Aoiketsu dropped down on the wall of the courtyard, casting his fiancee a confused look. "Hikari, this isn't exactly a holiday jaunt. I'm not going sightseeing or just to visit old friends. I'm going to escort Ouba-hime to Kintsusei-heika's court in Shunhou. It's a completely different thing."

"Don't say it like that." Hikari pouted, folding her arms across her chest. "You make me sound like some completely helpless individual, who just needs to be looked after all the time. I've been to Kutou before, you know. I know what it's like and what travelling is like, too. And I'm not asking you to protect me. I'm just saying that I'd like to go with you when you go. Why is that such a big problem?"

"Because it's going to be hard enough keeping the fact that Ouba-hime is travelling a secret without adding Kounan's blessed to the equation." Aoiketsu said heavily, resting his hands on her shoulders, but Hikari shook him off, glaring at him.

"I'm not Kounan's blessed anything. I'm your fiancee and you're treating me like I'm a nusiance." She said sharply. "Do you hate the idea of me coming that much, Aoi? I haven't been to Kutou in a long time, and I want to see Myoume. Besides, Ouba-hime is scared. She's travelling to a place she doesn't know and I feel for her. She and I, we talked a lot in the garden the other day. And I'd like to go with her, if I can. I want to be supportive of her… is that so wrong? She and I are almost the same age, after all."

"Yes, but…"

"Reizeitei-sama hasn't objected." Hikari pushed her point home. "I spoke to him, and he said that he understood my concerns and that Sairou would probably appreciate Kounan making such a gesture. He's not worried about it — so why are you?"

"Hikari…" Aoiketsu sighed, rubbing his temples. "All right. Listen. First of all, the Emperor may or may not be in favour… though I think he's probably said what he did because he's learnt by now that when you have an idea in your head, it's difficult to shake it. Besides, I know he knows you're worried about Myoume, and he probably sees

this as a good solution. However…"

"However, you don't want me coming?" Hikari looked hurt, and Aoiketsu groaned.

"Stop it." He begged. "You're doing that girl thing that you do when you want to make me feel guilty, and you're getting far too good at it for my liking."

Despite herself, Hikari smiled.

"I've been practicing." She said casually. "But I'm serious about this, Aoi. I'm not as helpless as I was when I first came here. I have Suzaku's power inside of me, and I can use it to some extent — certainly enough to protect myself, even if it's not at its full level yet. Chichiri's trained me relentlessly since I came back here, and he drummed all kinds of things into me as well. The bottom line is that I have those powers. You don't, yet you're not afraid of going. If you're not afraid, there's no reason for me to be. Is there?"

Aoiketsu did not reply, and Hikari sighed, linking her arm in his as she pulled him to his feet.

"Then tell me." She ordered. "Why don't you want me to come?"

"It's not a case of wanting." Aoiketsu admitted, turning to meet her gaze with clouded azure eyes. "Not at all. It's more a case of… this is my duty to Kutou's throne, that's all. And more, to do it, I'll be carrying a sword again. And I must be prepared to use it, if need be, to defend Ouba-hime from harm."

"So?" Hikari demanded. "You may be rusty, but you were one of Kutou's best soldiers, and Hyoushin-san trained you for a long time. Why should that be a problem? Between you and Sayo-san, I'm sure that things will be fine."

Aoiketsu pursed his lips.

"Nakago's spirit still surges within me." He said evenly. "I know it, and that's why I no longer fight. You know that too, Hikari. That bitter thrust for violence or vengeance when a sword is in my hand. If it came to a point where Ouba-hime was attacked, I'm sure that I could regulate my reaction and keep control, because it's a job. It's not something in which I have my heart and soul invested. But, on the other hand, if you were to be there… and someone was to hurt you…"

He reached up to touch her cheek, sadness in his gaze.

"I don't know what I might do in the heat of the moment." He murmured. "You mean that much to me. I might not be able to hold

back."

Hikari's eyes widened for a moment, then she grinned, shaking her head.

"I told you. I'll be able to take care of myself." She said firmly, slipping her arms around him. "And besides, if there is trouble, I don't intend on running to find it. If thieves or bandits attacked us, I'd be staying with the Princess and leaving you and Sayo-san to play with swords. It wouldn't come to that situation."

"Till we get there, its impossible to know." Aoiketsu said slowly. "I am worried about it, Hikari. I haven't fought since I held the *shinken* and faced down Kikei in the shrine in Kutou. I've been afraid to fight, knowing how close to the line I was in that battle. I don't want to be in a similar situation again. And I do love you that much… it may jeopardise my judgement and I might do something we all regret."

"I already told Ouba-hime that I'd come, if I could." Hikari told him. "And I'm not changing my mind. I promise not to put myself in harm's way, Aoi. But if you're that afraid of yourself, maybe it's time you took a sword again and came to grips with it once and for all. I know what kind of a person you are. Everyone here does, and so does everyone in Kutou. Right? Nothing bad will happen. You're not going to go postal and hurt someone you shouldn't hurt. I have total faith in that."

Aoiketsu sighed heavily.

"I'm not going to win this discussion, am I?" He asked helplessly, and Hikari shook her head.

"Not a chance." She assured him. "So you might as well get used to the idea. Follow Reizeitei-sama's example and accept that I've made up my mind. Okay?"

Aoiketsu closed his eyes for a moment. Then he nodded.

"Then I suppose that's how it is." He said heavily. "Fine. So long as Kinka-dono and Sayo don't have any objection, you can come. I just hope you don't regret it."

"I won't. And nor will you." Hikari said frankly, stretching up on tip-toes to kiss him on the cheek. "Thank you, Aoi. I appreciate it, you know. I want to see Myoume a whole lot too, and poor Ouba-hime is so apprehensive, too. If I can help her and see my friend, that's two things in one. Right?"

"You've already won, so you needn't drum it in." Aoiketsu said

resignedly. “I have to go and help finalise the route for our trip, so you can sit here and gloat over your victory a while. All right? If you’re coming too, I might look at a different route… either way it will take some time to settle, and much as I like your company, I think this is something I need all my concentration for.”

“Understood.” Hikari dimpled. “I don’t want to look at maps and stuff, anyhow. I’ll go to Ouba-hime’s room and see if she’d like some company. After all, you’ll be busy with Kinka-dono, and she might be feeling lonely.”

“Considering you just met, and considering you didn’t want to be part of the welcome party in the beginning, you seem to be keen to spend time with the Princess all of a sudden.” Aoiketsu reflected, and Hikari nodded.

“I know. Odd, isn’t it?” She agreed. “But I just feel like we have things in common. I had to leave my home and family too, after all. So I know how she feels better than most people do. That’s all, probably.”

“I suppose that’s true.” Aoiketsu acknowledged. “All right. Then I’ll see you later.”

He touched her cheek again, then,

“You’d better send a missive to the Eastern Village and tell Chichiri your plans, since you might be away a few weeks and he’ll worry.” He added. “Even if you can take care of yourself, he’s still officially your guardian, right?”

“I’ll do so.” Hikari agreed. “I’d intended to, anyhow. And he can pass the message on to the mountain, too, that I’m taking a trip and won’t be there for a while.”

She pursed her lips.

“I hope Shishi won’t be too annoyed that I’m going to see Myoume and she’s not.”

“Hikari, there is no way under the sun that Shishi is coming on this trip.” Aoiketsu said sharply, and Hikari laughed.

“That’s mean. Poor Shishi.”

“You know full well that I like Shishi as much as anyone.” Aoiketsu shook his head. “But the Emperor said it and I agree… Ouba-hime doesn’t need to be exposed to mountain language or a bandit tomboy who swings her sword or splits the earth soon as trouble’s on the horizon. She’d be scared out of her wits, no doubt, and I wouldn’t

blame her. I still remember how Shishi spoke to Kintsusei-sama the first time she met him… and I don't think we need a repeat. Not everyone is as understanding as Kutou's Emperor, and Ouba-hime may be good-natured, but she's still the protected and pampered child of a powerful King."

"It's all right. As I said before, I doubt Shishi'd want to meet a Princess." Hikari assured him. "But it's better she knows where I'm going, at the very least. So I'll see to that and you go get on with your route planning."

She winked at him.

"After all, Aoi-kun, it's been a while since you and I went on a journey."

"So, this is Touran, huh?"

Arina gazed around her, eyes wide with awe as she took in the busy, bustling northern city. Everywhere she looked, something was going on and for a moment she found herself mesmerised by the plethora of different stalls and traders dotted in between bigger emporia and more firmly rooted market benches. Ragamuffin children with torn clothing and bared feet ran in between elegantly dressed ladies, their maidservants trailing behind them with packages and boxes as though they had done the whole month's purchasing in one day. On the front forecourt of the big fabric emporium, a carriage waited as two burly men loaded bolts of cloth into the back, the horses whinnying and pawing the ground in their impatience to be off. The sound of rattling coach axels and clattering horse's hooves were interspersed with the calls of various sellers from the city market, and a mixture of smells filled the air as they passed between the rows of busy stalls. Despite the cold crispness of the day and the early hour the streets were already humming and on the furthermost street corner a man, his pipe and his monkey entertained the crowd with tricks and little tunes.

Though Bakaru had called it Hokkan's main city, it was nothing like the metropolitan sprawl of Tokyo, and Arina bit her lip, realising for the first time exactly how different the world Hikari had chosen to return to was.

"Hi-chan came to places like this and somehow made them feel like they could be her home." She murmured. "Kaeli-san, what are all these people selling? I can't read the stall signs, but there seem to be so many different people touting different things!"

“Few of us read the Hokkan-jin’s signs.” Kaeli admitted. “But for those of us who can speak with them, many traders are known by name. Meihi cloth is very sought for in Touran, because it is warm and well made and lasts long time. For the Hokkan-jin, the weather is cold. Like you feel it, Arina. They feel it too, and are glad of what we make.”

“I can understand that.” Instinctively Arina hugged her arms around her body as a chill wind whipped through the city. “Though there’s not snow here, there’s still a nip in the air. I find it hard to believe you people don’t feel it. You don’t get cold at all?”

“In very bad storms, yes. We do feel cold.” Kaeli responded. “But this is not that kind of weather. Spring is coming. This is not too cold at all, and compared with the mountain snow, nothing at all.”

Arina frowned, casting a sidelong glance at their other companion. He had spoken little on the walk down the mountain, and, upon entering Touran’s gates he had fallen completely silent, clearly on edge as he glanced around him with apprehensive, uncertain amethyst eyes. That he was tense and fearful put Arina in mind of Bakaru’s words about Kishayi’s past, and she sighed, wishing she could ask him what was wrong but knowing that if she did, he would not understand. Why he had chosen to come to the city at all she did not know — only that when she had arisen that morning she had found not only Kaeli but her son waiting to take her on the steep trek down the mountain to Hokkan’s capital city. On the descent, she had been glad of his presence, for it had taken the two experienced Meihi to keep her from slipping and sliding her way across the ice. But even so, Arina wondered at his motives. Was he trying to protect his mother in some way? Or her? Or was it some other reason — perhaps Bakaru had instructed him to make the trip, and he had simply obeyed his elder’s commands.

As she caught the glance, Kaeli offered her a smile, saying something in soft, almost reproachful tones to her son. Though she didn’t understand the words, from the sudden jerk of Kishayi’s head and the uncomfortable redness of his cheeks, Arina knew that for some reason or other her young rescuer had just received a scolding.

“Is something wrong?” She asked, and Kaeli shook her head.

“Kishayi is old enough not to be afraid of the city vendors now.” She said matter-of-factly. “When he was a small boy, I admit, I kept him close far too much and probably created fear in him of outside people. But not all outside people are bad. People in Hokkan never have hurt Meihi and I believe never will. Kishayi imagines too much,

is all. For you, is a new experience. Yet you do not seem scared. He should learn from you — this is what I told him."

"Bakaru-san said that your people had been through a lot of bad stuff." Arina said thoughtfully. "I guess it's hard for me to imagine that. Hikari told me that not everything in this world was good, and Bakaru-san said it as well. But you've been kind to me since I came here yesterday and I don't believe you would ever hurt me. So if you think Touran is safe, so do I."

She cast the uncomfortable Kishayi an apologetic look.

"I didn't mean to make him feel bad, or to make you tell him off." She added. "Especially if he doesn't want to be here at all."

"Kishayi made that decision himself. I did not tell him, and Bakaru did not either." Kaeli said frankly. "Kishayi's will was to come with us to Touran. So he came."

"Really?" Arina looked startled. "He came by choice? Why? If he hates it so much, I don't understand?"

"Some things a boy does not tell his mother." Kaeli said wryly. "I think, perhaps, they are things he should tell a father, so maybe Bakaru knows more than I. Or perhaps he faces his fear at last — I don't know. But he is here, and we are not just visiting Touran for pleasure. We have wool to collect."

She eyed Kishayi for a moment, saying something to him softly, and the young Meihi pursed his lips, slipping his fingers into the folds of his clothing and producing a handful of coins. He pushed them out across his palm, counting them slowly, then nodding his head, and Kaeli smiled.

"That should be plenty." She said approvingly. "Good."

"That's your money?" Arina peered at it, fascinated by the odd, glittering coins. "Where I come from, half of ours is paper and most people just use cards. Coins aren't worth very much at all — are these coins worth a lot?"

"Enough to buy a family food and necessities. More than that is not needed." Kaeli responded. She said something to her son, who nodded, taking one of the coins and holding it out to his startled young companion.

"I don't…"

"Take it." Kaeli instructed. "That coin is to send message to Kutou. I have Bakaru's letter and we must meet with the people who will take

messages to East. If you keep that coin, we will not spend too much on wool."

"I… all right." Arina shrugged, turning it over in her hand. "What… is this on the back? A… turtle? Wait… is this… Genbu?"

"Yes." Kaeli nodded, and at the sound of the God's name, Kishayi's head jerked up. He said something, and Arina clearly heard the words 'Bakaru' and "Urumiya" in amongst his soft-spoken tribal dialect. He gestured towards a column set in the centre of the busy thoroughfare, and Arina gazed at it uncomprehendingly.

"What does he mean?" She asked Kaeli plaintively. "That column is important — why?"

"The tablet written there is in old script — in letters Meihi still use." Kaeli said evenly. "It marks place where someone else from your world came here. She was Genbu's Miko, and she made Hokkan at peace. I do not know all the rules of Genbu, and do not follow his teaching. Meihi do not, after all. But Bakaru has Genbu's blood and so this place is special to him and therefore to us."

"Genbu no Miko." Arina's eyes narrowed. "Okuda Takiko, yes?"

"Yes." Kaeli looked surprised. "You know this, then? She is known to you in your world?"

"She's been dead a long time. Genbu's legend finished years ago." Arina shook her head. "But I know her name, yes. And I knew she'd come here. But she went back, didn't she? She didn't stay here after Genbu was summoned. She went back to her world."

"Yes." Kaeli agreed, and Arina sighed.

"That's the bit I'm still trying to understand." She admitted. "I'm not sure how I'm here, or why, or what drew me here exactly. But I know that when my friend Hikari came to be Seiryuu no Miko, for some reason it meant she could never go back. I don't understand what 'Shinzahou' are or why being one means she has to stay here. There's nothing in the books in my world to legislate for those kinds of things. But if Genbu no Miko went back… why couldn't Hikari?"

"Shinzahou is a word I have heard, but I have little information about it." Kaeli looked apologetic. "Bakaru will know more. I think… maybe he once had one, that Genbu no Miko left in Hokkan. But I never saw it. And he has not spoken to us about it. It was only when Lilaihi was here that I heard it mentioned. Not before and not since."

"This Lilaihi person knows Hi-chan, so I hope he'll be able to help

me find her." Arina said pensively. 'It seems a long way to go and in the wrong direction. Not that I'm not grateful for your help,' She added hurriedly. "I am. But if Hikari is in Kounan, Kutou seems to be out of the way."

"There are no Meihi in Kounan." Kaeli shook her head. "Is too hot there for us to live. And Lilaihi is man that Bakaru trusts. You should trust, too. If he can help you, I think he will."

"Even though I'm a total stranger? It's not like I have anything to offer him in return, or any skills that I can use to make money to pay him"

"Meihi word is bond." Kaeli said simply. "We have promised to help you, and we will not go back on promises. Lilaihi too is Meihi. Our promise is his, too. He will help because we ask him to. That is all."

"Then I'm glad that it was you people who found me on the mountain." Arina said pensively. "Though I'm still very confused about why I came here. I was visiting the grave of a different Miko — Oosugi Suzuno — and then, somehow… I don't really know what happened."

"Do you miss your family?" Kaeli asked softly, and Arina shook her head.

"Nothing much to miss." She said evenly. "They and I don't really get along. No, to be more accurate, they don't really know I exist. You have to care about someone to fight with them, right? My Mum and Dad don't care what I do, and never are around to worry about my schoolwork or anything else. They won't even notice I'm gone, and I really don't miss either of them at all, right now."

She smiled at Kaeli's horrified expression, spreading her hands.

"I guess that sounds awful to you, huh? Since you people are so close knit. But it's all right, really. I'm used to it. It's normal for me, that way."

"Family is precious thing." Kaeli said gravely. "Till you lose it, maybe, you don't know you have it."

"Hikari said that, or something like it." Arina reflected. "That she'd realised how much she loved her family when she was parted from them. But I don't feel that way, Kaeli-san. I really don't. I'm confused about being in this world, and there are a lot of things that I don't understand. Last night I felt funny, I admit it — because there were strange sounds and smells in the village and I can't tell yet which are

safe and which are dangerous. But I'm not thinking about my family. I'm more concerned with finding Hikari than I am with getting back to them. I mean, I guess I'll go back eventually. I've no intention of staying here forever, and if I can, I want to take her back with me. But even if I can't work out how to do that, I want to at least see her and speak to her. And if that's why I was able to come to this world, then I won't waste the opportunity."

She glanced at Kishayi, offering him a smile.

"I'm just glad you found me." She added. "Because I'd have frozen to death on your mountain otherwise."

Kishayi eyed her for a moment, then he returned the smile. He stretched across to tap her on the arm, saying something to her slowly and carefully as if somehow he wanted her to understand it. Arina frowned, furrowing her brow as she tried to work out his meaning.

"I'm sorry, Kishayi-kun, I don't understand you." She said at length. "I can't even get my head round English properly, and I don't think there's any Meihi language in my world anywhere at all."

Kishayi pursed his lips, and Arina knew that from her expression if not from her words he had worked out her meaning. He slipped his hand round her wrist, guiding her gently across to a nearby market vendor, and as they drew closer, Arina saw that the man was selling pendants and charms of various shapes and sizes, some engraved, some moulded from clay and fired in a makeshift oven. A few were carved from black mountain stone, and Arina wondered absently if they had been originally done by the Meihi who lived on Koku-zan. As the seller greeted Kaeli warmly, her young son drew Arina's attention to one particular tray of charms, each inscribed with a different image. She frowned, eying him in confusion, and Kishayi offered her another smile. Then, very carefully, he touched his finger first to a charm with a picture of a mountain, then a picture of a house, and then, finally, the picture of a tree. Arina stared at him as he repeated the sequence, then gazed at her as if waiting for a response.

Then, in a moment, Arina realised that he was using the charms as a form of communication.

"Mountain… house… tree." She murmured. "The mountain is Koku-zan, surely. So the house must mean the village. And the tree… there are trees on the mountain. Where you found me had trees, I think. Didn't it?"

Kishayi brushed his finger against the symbol for flower, then lifted his hand to his face, touching his eyelids briefly before gesturing

towards her. Arina faltered as she struggled to understand.

“Flowers… eyes… me.” She muttered. “Mountains… village… tree… flowers… eyes… me. What are you asking me, Kishayi? What are you trying to say?”

Patiently Kishayi repeated his routine, a question in his gaze, and Arina pursed her lips.

“You want to show me something on the mountain? Something with flowers?” She hazarded. “Kaeli-san, help me out here, please? I don’t know how to ask him if I’m right… but…”

“Kishayi?” Kaeli glanced at the charms, then at her son, and a smile touched her lips as she nodded. She said something to him, and Kishayi grinned, nodding his head as he responded in his own soft tones.

“He wants to take you to place he gathers herbs, later.” Kaeli told Arina. “If you want to come. He likes to show you the place where he found you, so that you can make sure you didn’t lose something. When you go to Kutou, you won’t come back to mountain. He says he thinks it will help you, but maybe he wants to show it off to you.”

She eyed her son pensively, then,

“It is not like Kishayi.” She admitted. “To want to share his world with Outsider. But please, Arina, if you will go with him, I will be glad. Kishayi needs to not be scared. You are not scaring him. So if he trusts you, maybe, he trust others too.”

“Sure, I don’t mind.” Arina agreed, casting Kishayi a grin as she reached out her own hand to touch the symbol for ‘flower’. Then she brushed her finger against her eyelashes, nodding her head. Kishayi’s beautiful amethyst eyes lit up at her reply, and Kaeli laughed.

“You will have to one of you find better way to talk, if you are to be friends.” She said wisely. “Even if is just for few days.”

“I never much saw the point in learning other languages.” Arina admitted sheepishly. “But right now I’m really wishing that I knew how to speak yours. Lilaihi… Hyoushin… that guy is like you, isn’t he, though? He lives in Kutou, so he must speak my language too… right?”

“He does, and more than I or Bakaru do.” Kaeli agreed. “Lilaihi is not as Meihi as Koku-zan’s people are. He is from East. He belongs in Shunhou, is married to a not Meihi woman. But he has Meihi at heart. And he will be an ally to you.”

“That’s a relief to hear.” Arina said fervently. “I never realised how difficult it would be, to be stuck in a foreign place without a translator.”

She met Kishayi’s gaze, sighing.

“You never left the village though, did you? And you don’t mix with people outside, so you’re just the same as me.” She reflected. “Between the pair of us, we’re hopeless.”

“I have tried to teach him, but he covers his ears and will not learn.” Kaeli looked troubled. “Is my fault, I think, in the beginning. Arina, Kishayi was not born in Meihi village. He has been to outside before. He was born far from this place, in the desert in the West. I was escaped slave, and because of this, he was born there. Sairou’s people were very kind to us. They help us very much, and let us live with them without feeling a burden. I work and I feed Kishayi this way, but the weather was hot and dry and struggle to get water made him often ill. I hoped, on Koku-zan would be better for him to grow up. He was so precious child to me, you see. I could not lose him.”

“Bakaru told me something about that.” Arina admitted. “I’m sorry that those things happened to you, Kaeli-san. You and Kishayi both.”

“I think maybe I give my fears to him as he grew older.” Kaeli said sadly. “He does not remember Sairou, only Koku-zan. And he does not remember the friends with dark hair and tanned skin who helped bring him to birth. Those people I owe my life and his life. I will always be in debt to them, and they were not Meihi. But though he knows it, Kishayi does not remember them. And he knows that I was slave. He knows that because of being slave, his Father died and his brothers are gone. He knows these were people from outside. And so he fears them. Because I feared them too, for a long, long time.”

“But you don’t fear them now?”

“I know that not everyone is the same.” Kaeli responded evenly. “And I know that Kutou even now is changing. I would not go there again, even though I was born in that land. I could not be there where so many Meihi died and my sons were stolen from me. But I do not believe Kutou people bad. Lilaihi lives there, and his sister too. So there must be good there, too. And if in Kutou there are good, and Sairou too, and Hokkan where we trade… the world has many outside people who can be Meihi’s friends. Kishayi is just too young and sheltered to realise yet.”

She turned, gesturing across the cobbled walkway to another stall.

“There we can buy wool.” She continued, adding something in Meihi to Kishayi who nodded his head, producing the coins once more as they approached the stall. “And then we will send your message. It may snow, later… I would like to be on mountain before it does, though if weather is bad maybe you will have to go another day with Kishayi to his copse.”

“Another day.” Arina murmured. “How long will the message take to get to Kutou, Kaeli-san? And a response, too?”

“Maybe a week.” Kaeli pondered. “Perhaps less. I am not sure. Weather may affect it… but I think a week is right. But Lilaihi is at court and has fast messengers who can come more quickly to mountain on his orders. So maybe not so long for a reply.”

“Then it might be about… ten days before I leave here?” Arina asked, and Kaeli smiled.

“Perhaps.”

“Well, I was wondering where I should go on holiday this spring.” Arina looked rueful. “I didn’t really envisage a winter wonderland trip to Ancient China, but I’ll go with it. I really should’ve brought my camera with me… although judging by this place they’d probably have thought I was casting a spell or something when the flash went off.”

“Camera?” Kaeli looked blank, and Arina dismissed it with a flick of her fingers.

“Nothing. I’ll show you when we get back to the village.” She said. “So long as the batteries don’t run down, that is!”

Kaeli sent her an uncertain smile, then turned her attention to the purchase of the wool skeins, and Arina let her mind wander, gazing around at the unfamiliar surroundings as she absorbed the relaxed, friendly atmosphere that the Northern city exuded. Despite its joviality, she remembered Bakaru’s words about safety, and she wrapped her cape more tightly around her body, realising that she had attracted a few curious looks. It was because she was with the Meihi, she decided, and yet so obviously not one of their people. And yet, even despite the interest, she did not feel threatened by the attention. They were observing her just as she observed them, and a few people offered her a smile as she caught their gaze across the busy market square. Instinctively she bowed her head towards them, and they followed suit, seemingly pleased with her good manners.

“Though that’s just too many years of school being drummed into

me." She reflected to herself wryly. "Always bow to the teacher and you'll get a lesser sentence. I guess that logic even works in a world inside a book."

"Arina? Have you the coin Kishayi gave you?" Kaeli's words startled her back to herself and she turned, blushing slightly as she realised they had been joined by a youngish man with a long tail of dark hair and curious brown eyes. She nodded, holding it out, and Kaeli took it, turning back to the stranger.

"This message is from Bakaru of Koku-zan." She said clearly. "It is a message for Tou Hyoushin and must go to Shunhou, to Kutou's court. It is very important that it gets there safely. Is it possible that you do this like you have done for him before?"

"For the old guy on the mountain, nothing easier." The stranger agreed amiably. "Consider it done, Kaeli-san. Bakaru-san has done enough favours for us over the years, after all — I'll see it gets there. Don't you worry. I have to ride another message to Kutou tomorrow, in any case… tell your jou-chan to keep the coin and spend it on something nice instead."

"Jou-chan?" Arina blinked, and the man inclined his head in her direction.

"That'd be you, missy." He said cheerfully. "You're not a Meihi, so I guess that old guy's doing for you what he's done for others before you. He's a regular saint, that one — he and his people have helped many a traveller lost on the mountain paths in one way or another. Trust in them, all right? They'll see you safely home again."

He took the folded parchment that Bakaru had tied neatly with a blue woven ribbon, shaking his head as Kaeli gestured to the coin again. "No, it's all right. Really. I have to make the trip in any case. And I'm guessing your need to contact Kutou is on account of the jou-chan here… she's a stray all right, and I'm assuming she's from the East?"

"It's the best place for her to go to meet up with those she cares for." Kaeli responded. "Thank you, Sou-san. Bakaru has trust in you to deliver messages quickly."

"Well, I'd be no good at my job if I didn't." Sou responded, amused. "Leave it with me. I'll take care of it. Especially if the fate of a cute young jou-chan rests in the balance, too."

He winked at Arina, then turned on his heel, heading back towards the place where his horse was tethered, drinking water from a

communal trough.

Arina frowned.

“What does he think I am, twelve years old?” She muttered. “Jou-chan?! Seriously?”

Kaeli laughed.

“Sou-san is like this always.” She said wisely. “Often I bring messages to him from Bakaru as I speak good Chinese and Bakaru cannot always leave village himself. When he writes message to Lilaihi, always it goes with Sou-san because he is most reliable rider. Also, he and Bakaru have good friendship, because when Sou-san fell off his horse two springs ago, Bakaru helped him and Meihi gave him shelter in the storm. He is good man, Arina. We can trust him.”

“Maybe.” Arina’s brows drew together. “But I don’t like being talked to like I’m a little kid. I’m seventeen years old, after all. I’m not still in elementary school.”

“Seventeen?” Kaeli eyed her with interest. “Then you and Kishayi are same age. He is also seventeen.”

“Really?” Arina grinned. “I thought he must be about my age, but not that he was the same. I guess that’s something we have in common, then. If he was in my world, he and I’d be classmates, most likely.”

She cast Kishayi a sidelong glance, a rueful expression entering her dark eyes.

“Though somehow I can’t picture Kishayi in my world.” She admitted. “Not even if I try really hard.”

“The Miko’s world is mysterious place, Bakaru says.” Kaeli agreed seriously. “Is not a place that Meihi can go.”

“No. And I don’t think you’d want to.” Arina shook her head. “The cities are very different from Touran, that’s for sure. And I don’t know if there are villages like yours anywhere, but if there are, I doubt very much they’d be as peaceful and settled as the one on Koku-zan.”

“Koku-zan is Bali’s blessed mountain. Is always at peace, there.” Kaeli nodded. “Your world has different cultures.”

She smiled.

“Shall we walk back?” She asked. “Are you tired, Arina? Will you want us to help you?”

“Actually, I feel quite fresh.” Arina looked surprised. “Maybe it’s the cold air or something, but I don’t feel that tired at all. Although I probably will need both of you to help me up the mountainside, if the path’s anything like it was coming down.”

“Of course.” Kaeli agreed. “I must carry this wool safely, but Kishayi is here and he will help.”

She said something in Meihi to her son at this juncture, and he glanced at her in surprise, then nodded his head. Shyly he held out a hand to Arina, who grinned, taking it firmly in her own.

“Thanks, Kishayi.” She said warmly. “I’m counting on you.”

Though he could not understand her words, Kishayi returned the grin, and Arina knew he’d somehow grasped her meaning.

“And I guess that’s as good as we can do, for now.” She murmured to herself, as they headed back towards the Touran city gates. “If pointing to pictures and waving hands around is the limit of our communication, well, I guess we’ll just have to settle for that.”

As they carefully made their way up the winding, steep mountain path, Arina soon found that she was as glad of the young Meihi’s support as she had been on the way down, for though he was slightly built and not obviously strong in his appearance, he was tenacious and experienced with the rocky landscape. No matter how many times her feet slipped he was always there a second before to catch her, and as they finally reached the village boundary, Arina paused a moment to catch her breath as she looked at him in new admiration.

Though she herself was sweating hard and panting for air after the strenuous climb, Kishayi did not seem in the least bit unsettled by their exploits. In fact, she reflected ruefully, he looked as though he had simply been for a quiet stroll in the park, and even his thick silver hair was still neatly knotted back from his face, untroubled by the teasing wintery wind. At her glance, he stopped, eying her quizzically. Then, as his mother hurried to deliver her burden to the village chief, he took Arina once more by the arm, leading her gently towards the small cottage that was his and his mother’s home. Arina stared at him, not comprehending his motives, but she did not fight him as he ushered her through the doorway and into the little chamber beyond, gesturing for her to sit down as he disappeared into the back. Arina did as she was bidden, shedding her heavy cape as she did so, and within a few moments her guide returned, a steaming mug in his hands. Without a word he held it out to her, and Arina gazed at him in disbelief.

“For me?” She asked, gesturing to herself as she did so, and Kishayi nodded his head.

“For Arina.” He agreed, his pronunciation sounding strange, and a faint flush touched Arina’s cheeks as she realised it was the first time she had heard him say her name. Carefully she took the hot ceramic vessel from his grip, taking a tentative sip. As before, the warm soup revived her spirits, and she sat back against the seat, offering him a smile.

“Thank you.” She said softly. “Even if you can’t speak my language, you seem to know how I’m feeling all the same. You’re really something else, Kishayi-kun. I can honestly say that in my whole life I’ve never, ever met a guy like you before and probably never will again.”

At the stream of unfamiliar language, Kishayi frowned, and Arina thought she saw a flicker of frustration cross his beautiful amethyst eyes. He hesitated, then he sat down beside her, keeping enough space between them so as not to jog her arm or spill her drink. For a moment there was silence between them, as Arina finished the broth, setting the mug down on the smooth wood-carved table. Then she sighed, folding her arms across her chest.

“Kaeli-san is right.” She reflected out loud. “If you and I are really going to talk to one another, we need to find…”

She paused, her eyes widening as she had an idea and she got to her feet, ignoring the startled look of her companion as she hurried into the little back chamber that had been her room the night before. Grabbing her bag off the bed, she brought it back into the central chamber, dumping it down on the soft-woven rug that covered the floor and carefully tipping out the contents. Bemused, Kishayi watched her in silence, and at his expression Arina laughed, gesturing for him to come and sit down with her. For a moment he eyed her without comprehension, then, slowly he did as he was bidden, sinking down onto the soft rug as he eyed her expectantly.

Arina spread out the items on the floor around her, then she glanced back at her companion.

“You used pictures to speak to me earlier.” She said frankly. ‘And you had the right idea, I think. After all, we both see the same stuff, even if we don’t use the same words. You already know that I’m Arina,’ She pointed to herself. “And I know that you’re Kishayi.” She pointed to him, and he nodded slowly, a wary look still in his amethyst eyes.

Arina smiled, reaching across to tap Suzuno's notebook with her index finger.

"Book." She said clearly. Then she moved her hand to her purse, opening it up and tipping out the coins that were inside. At the sight of them, Kishayi's eyes widened, and Arina nodded.

"Money." She told him.

Kishayi frowned, then a light dawned in his amethyst eyes and he reached across to pick up the coins, glancing at them and then at her.

"Money?" He repeated softly, and Arina nodded.

"Yes!" She agreed. Kishayi grinned, clasping it tightly in his hand, then holding it back out to her.

"Jaeha." He said simply.

"Ja… what?" Arina blinked, and Kishayi dropped the coin down into her hand.

"Jaeha." He said again, pointing to it as he did so, and Arina's smile widened.

"Okay, I think I get you." She said, nodding her head. "Jaeha is money… that's right, huh? Jaeha… money. Yes?"

Kishayi nodded, and Arina sat back, dropping the coin back down onto the rug.

"Well, if I've got ten days, we'll surely manage to get a few words here and there, right?" She reflected. "Are you listening, Kishayi-kun? Here comes the next lot."

She stretched out her hand, carefully touching several of the things that surrounded her.

"Table. Bag. Chair. Rug. Floor."

"Table…" Kishayi faltered, then slowly copied her movement, repeating the words in his careful, accented way.

"Table. Bag. Cha..ir. Rug. Floor."

Arina nodded.

"Book and money." She reminded him, and Kishayi smiled.

"Book. And. Money." He agreed. Then,

"Shi. Gahi. Kio. Shaehi. Dura."

As he spoke, he tapped each of the same items that Arina had, and Arina nodded her head.

“Okay. Shi… Gahi? K… what was the next one?”

“Kio. Shaehi. Dura.”

“Right. So Kio… that’s chair. Right? And Shaehi… the rug?” Arina tapped the rug. “Then… Dura is floor. Right? Yes?”

Kishayi nodded his head, stretching out his hand to touch Suzuno’s book.

However, before he could speak, the book glittered briefly with white light, sending out sparks of energy towards his fingers and he let out an exclamation, pulling his hand back as he stared at the volume in suspicion and fright. Arina frowned, scooping up the notebook and hugging it tightly to her chest.

“I’m sorry, Kishayi-kun.” She said apologetically. “I guess this book isn’t exactly normal. Let’s forget that one for the time being, okay?”

She slipped the diary back into her bag, trying to ignore the tingling sensation that ran through her fingers as she did so.

“But it wasn’t me that made it spark like that. It was *Kishayi*.” She realised. “Why would that be? Is it because he’s from this world? The world Suzuno came to help save? I wish I understood. The whole thing makes no sense whatsoever.”

She offered Kishayi another smile, setting her bag back down.

“Right. So. Let’s try it again, okay? Table. Bag. Chair. Rug. Floor. Money. Now you?”

But Kishayi did not respond, and at the fearful look in his eyes, Arina frowned.

“Kishayi?”

Slowly the young Meihi got to his feet, holding his hands out in an odd gesture before her as if making some kind of apology. Then he bowed his head, and left the room.

Arina let out her breath in a rush, shaking her head as if to clear it.

“Kaeli-san and Bakaru-san both said he was scaredy.” She realised. “And I guess that book jumping sparks like that would be enough to shake even someone who wasn’t on edge about things from outside. But shit, I didn’t mean to frighten him. And we were starting to make some progress, too. It was almost fun, even if it was like a playschool

game or something. Now maybe he's mad with me, or scared of me, or both. And I don't want that. I *really* don't want that."

She sighed, glancing at her bag as she did so.

"That book is trouble." She muttered. "First it got me into this mess, now it's upsetting the people who've rescued me. I really hope that Bakaru-san and Kaeli-san don't think I tried to cast some kind of spell on him or something. The last thing I need is to be ejected from the village when I've nowhere else I can go."

She chewed down on her lip, glancing around her as she did so.

"What was it he said?" She reflected. "Table was… shi, wasn't it? And floor… floor was dura. Chair was… kio? I can't for the life of me remember what rug was. Money… I think money was jae… jae…"

"Jaeha." A voice from the doorway startled her and she glanced up, meeting Bakaru's amused eyes with startled dark ones.

"I'm sorry, child. I didn't mean to interrupt your study of our language."

"Bakaru-san!" Arina was on her feet immediately. "Bakaru-san, Kishayi…"

"It's all right." Bakaru held up his hands. "He wanted me to come and apologise to you properly on his behalf. He would have himself, but I can make you understand more easily his feelings than he can at the moment."

"I frightened him, didn't I?" Arina sighed, and Bakaru shook his head.

"Not you. The book you carry." He said softly. "A book with spiritual properties that someone like Kishayi has never experienced. He knows you're from the other world and that strange things surround that place. And he isn't afraid of you, Arina… it's not that. But it was just unexpected… and it startled him. That's all. I'm afraid that in many ways he's still very easily unsettled by things from outside the village. Going to Touran probably added to it, as well. He hasn't done that in a long time and the last time he did he cried and begged to be taken back home."

"He did?" Despite herself a faint smile touched Arina's lips. "He really *is* a scaredy, isn't he?"

"Sometimes, but his heart is good." Bakaru returned the smile, reaching over to touch her reassuringly on the head. "The message has been sent to Lilaihi, though, and that's the important thing. As for

Kishayi, he's sorry that he ran out on you. He told me that you were trying to teach him your words, and he was trying to do the same for ours. It's the first time he's shown any interest in the outside language, and I'm all for you to continue in whatever way you think might work. But if he backs off, don't be offended or upset by it. It really isn't your fault in any way whatsoever."

"He saved my life, though." Arina looked pensive. "And on the mountain today he was totally without fear, like he'd been scrambling over rocks and snow since he was tiny. Well, I guess he probably has, thinking about it. I don't think he's a coward, Bakaru-san. And I won't be cross with him because he got scared. That book scares me too, somewhat. I don't know what it is, not really. Just that I want to keep it with me, because I feel like its part of the reason I'm here. I shouldn't have shown it to him, but I didn't know it would react to him when he tried to touch it."

"It reacted to him directly? To *his* touch, not your own?" Bakaru looked startled, and Arina nodded.

"When he tried to tell me the Meihi word for book." She agreed sadly. "It sparked out white light at his fingers and he pulled back. If I'd known it would…"

"May I see this book, Arina?"

"Sure." Arina shrugged, opening the bag and pulling it out. "Here. It belonged to Byakko no Miko, Oosugi Suzuno. But aside from that, what it does… I really don't understand."

"It has a strong spiritual aura." Bakaru reflected, taking it and turning it over in his hands. "So much so that I don't think I should try and open it. I don't think it's for me to see the contents, after all. That it's from the Miko's world is undeniable. It has that same sense about it as you do, in that respect. Byakko no Miko, you say? Then it definitely isn't something I should tamper with."

He handed it back, and as he did so, Arina remembered Kaeli's words.

"Bakaru-san, Kaeli-san said you once had a Shinzahou to look after." She said eagerly. "Is that true? Did you really have Genbu's Shinzahou?"

"Yes, once." Bakaru's expression broke into a smile. "But not any more, I'm afraid, so if you want to see it, I can't help you. Eighteen months ago I gave it to Lilaihi in order to help him save Kutou from destruction. Since then, noone knows where it is. Maybe Genbu took it

back with him when he returned to the heavens."

"I see." Arina pursed her lips. "She also said you had Genbu's blood. That sounds sort of disgusting, if Genbu is a turtle snake creature — what does she mean, please?"

"Ah." Bakaru reached up to touch his brow, and Arina's eyes widened as something small and black began to curl across his skin. "This is what she meant. This mark belongs to the stellar warrior Urumiya. More correctly, it belongs to half of Urumiya… the soul was split between my brother and I, and since Bachisu passed away I've felt no real claim to that title. But that's what Kaeli meant. I'm Genbu's chosen, although I live the life of a mountain Meihi."

"But… shit… Genbu no Miko came like, two hundred years ago!" Arina's eyes almost fell out of her head. "Bakaru-san, are you really that old?"

Bakaru laughed, shaking his head in amusement.

"No, thankfully, I'm not." He replied evenly. "I bear the spirit, child. I'm not the one who raised Genbu with the Miko's help. The chosen of Genbu have long since died and been reborn, maybe into several forms over the years since Okuda Takiko left this world. I don't know how many lifetimes have existed between that Urumiya and myself. Maybe none. Maybe many. I can't tell you and have no memories of that past life to share with you, either. Those who bear stellar souls live ordinary lives unless the God calls on them to do his bidding. I was chosen to guard his Shinzahou, and so I have always had this mark. My brother too had a similar duty to perform, before he died. Where the other Genbu souls are, only the God himself knows for sure. But Hokkan is at peace, so the chances of them being called on are remote."

He glanced at the book once more.

"You said that volume belonged to Byakko no Miko?" He asked, and Arina nodded, looking embarrassed.

"Yes. I'm sorry, by the way. I didn't think you looked that old, but when you said…"

"It's all right." Bakaru shook his head. "You're a newcomer to this world and its rules and situations are fresh to you, too. You should not concern yourself with it too much. As I said, Genbu's story is long since over."

"I suppose so." Arina agreed. "Bakaru-san, will you tell Kishayi for me that it's all right and that I understand? Oh, and… and if he still

wants me to come with him to his copse, I… I'd like that. When he's ready… I'd like to see it."

"I'll tell him." Bakaru agreed. "In the meantime, you should probably get some rest. You've had a strenuous walk today, and there's a storm closing in. Take the chance to get some sleep, and I'm sure Kaeli will wake you when there's food available."

"All right." Arina nodded her head. "So long as you tell Kishayi, I'll do that. I do feel a little sleepy, thanks to that broth of his. I guess it wouldn't hurt to take a nap."

She scooped up her belongings, stifling a yawn as she did so.

"Thank you, Bakaru-san. I seem to owe you a hell of a lot of favours at the moment."

"You owe us nothing." Bakaru assured her. "You came to us without malice and so we help you to the best of our ability. That's all it is, my child."

He touched her once more on the head, offering her a gentle smile.

"Rest safely, and I'll speak to you further on the morrow."

Chapter 6

Chapter Five

:::Flashback:::
The Kanin Peaks, a century earlier

For a moment nothing moved, as Tokaki and Tatara stared at the stranger in stunned silence.

Then, at length, Tokaki found his tongue.

"Toroki?" He managed, glancing the dusty, oddly-clad young woman up and down as if he could not believe his eyes. "You're serious? You're one of ***Byakko's*** *people?"*

"Of course I am." Toroki said calmly, slipping her glove back over her fingers as she offered him a benign smile. "That's why I had Suzuno brought here. I needed to speak to her, alone, and ascertain if she really was Byakko's sent Miko."

"Well, she is." Tokaki said shortly. "And you really need to work on your greeting rituals. I was ready as hell to come in here and tear you limb from limb. Even Kasa… Tatara was raising a sweat when he realised Suzuno'd disappeared. You're damn lucky he didn't use his vines to bring the whole cave down on top of us all! And!"

He turned, fixing Suzuno with a dark glare.

*"**You** were supposed to be keeping in step with us! I told you not to wander off — what in hell were you playing at, exploring on your own? Dammit, Suzuno, do you think I give you warnings for my own amusement?"*

Suzuno bristled at the disapproval in his expression.

"I didn't choose to be man-handled by some hairy thug and dragged here." She defended herself. "It wasn't by choice, you know."

*"**Are** you hurt, Suzuno-sama?" Tatara asked softly, and Suzuno frowned, biting her lip as she met the other Seishi's gaze. Though his words were calm and levelly spoken, his expression belied him, and as she glanced at him, she saw a faint glimmer of anger still lingering in the depths of the man's violet eyes. Hurriedly she shook her head.*

"No. I'm really not." She said quickly. "Toroki did just want to talk to

me. Even if it was unorthodox, that's all it was. Really, Tatara-san. I'm fine. And I'm sorry I worried you."

"Then I suppose all is well." Tatara sighed, and to Suzuno's relief, the preoccupation faded from his gaze at her words. "Though I feel we should probably leave here. I don't know how much damage my vines might have wrought in the stonework, and if the ceiling came down now…"

"We'd all be nicely trapped." Toroki observed thoughtfully. "An interesting way of protecting the Miko, bringing down a cave on top of her."

*"**You** started this, by bringing her here against her will!" Tokaki began, but Suzuno shook her head, holding up her hands.*

"Tatara-san's right." She said softly. "We shouldn't stay here. It's dusty and dark and obviously not this Taikyoku-zan place. We've found another one of Byakko's people, so coming here wasn't a bad thing, but I don't want to get squashed by any falling rocks or whatever. So let's go above ground? Please?"

"Are you coming with us? Or did you just want to poke the Miko and make sure she was real?" Tokaki sent Toroki a quizzical look, and the young woman smiled.

"That's a foolish question." She said frankly. "I exist to serve Byakko. I was born with his mark and I'm here to help save his people. There are a lot of negative things afoot in Sairou these days, whether you know about them or you don't, that's all. Suzuno's own life could have been in danger had I approached her in another way. These caves are smuggler's caves, after all. Many of the people who operate here look up to me as one of his chosen, but might equally be swayed by the opportunity to take Byakko no Miko and sell her to people who might like her to conveniently disappear. It happened before and it could happen again."

"So you kidnapped her to help protect her?" Tatara's brow furrowed in confusion, and Toroki shook her head, laughing in amusement at his expression.

"I'm sorry." She said honestly. "I've just met you and I'm already talking like you have all the pieces to the puzzle when I've given you none at all to work with."

She gestured to the opening of the cave.

"If we follow that passage it will lead more quickly to the surface." She added. "Noone will challenge us. I told my people here that tonight I would probably leave the mountain and that I might not come back. That it was Byakko's bidding and that, if I went, I would hopefully find a way to save

Sairou from its enemies, inside and out. This has all been seen, after all. Bits and pieces, true — but tonight's meeting was always going to happen this way."

"Toroki sees the future." Suzuno explained helpfully, as they made their way through the cramped, winding walkway towards the mountainside above. "That's her Byakko power. To see the future — and show it to other people, somehow, using some strange white magic aura."

"A prophet, huh?" Tokaki eyed her curiously. "Really?"

"Yes." Toroki agreed solemnly. "I've known for a long time that Byakko no Miko would come to the mountain with two of her protectors and that I would have to take whatever chance I had to speak to her and win her trust. My methods were both desperate and probably inappropriate, for which I apologise. But I didn't see another way to get her attention. And I wanted to speak to her without your influence on her judgement."

"Do you think that our influence is bad or something?" Tokaki looked wounded, and Toroki grinned.

"Not at all. The opposite — I know that both of you already take Suzuno's safety very seriously." She said evenly. "But because of that, I thought you might be tempted to answer on her behalf, and I wanted to hear her own feelings and resolve. And also, tell her the things I'd seen so that she can process them for herself. If they mean anything, then you'll know them soon enough. But Suzuno doesn't know this world, and there are many things she's not aware of yet. I wanted a chance to make her aware without any interruptions, well-meaning or otherwise."

"She said that just because someone has Byakko's mark doesn't automatically make them my — or our — ally." Suzuno said thoughtfully, as Tatara helped her over a difficult patch of uneven ground, leading her out into the twilight above. "Thank you, Tatara-san. That kind of scared me a little bit. That it might not be as simple as finding Byakko's Seishi, but… also… convincing them that they want to be a part of anything at all."

*"Are **you** convinced, then?" Tokaki asked her quizzically. "No more moaning about things? Are you settled on being our Miko, now?"*

"I guess so." Suzuno eyed him in surprise. "It's still sort of hazy in my mind, but some of the things Toroki said… I want to help. People are suffering and Papa always taught me that folk who turned their back on suffering people were the kind of folk who shouldn't dare meet even their own gaze in the mirror. I don't want to be one of those people, because I know he'd hate it if I was. So if I can help… besides, if I help, I can go home. Can't I? To my world. Can't I?"

“I think it’s almost a certainty.” Toroki agreed. “Byakko no Miko’s world is different from this one, after all. Yes, Suzuno. I think so.”

“Then that seems to be the best solution.” Suzuno sighed in relief. “I’ll help you and then I’ll go home and everyone will be happy.”

“You did just say it wasn’t going to be simple, however.” Tatara reminded her. “Toroki-san, what did you mean when you said that it had ‘happened before’ and might ‘happen again’ in terms of the people here in the mountain? What do you think threatens Suzuno’s safety?”

“And if you see the future, you could at least tell us where the other Seishi are and how we raise Byakko.” Tokaki added.

“I can’t, not directly.” Toroki shook her head. “My gift is not simply to see the future. I see the past and the present from various perspectives, too. Little fragments of pictures which grow in strength and coherence as the one before comes to be. Right now, for example, I can’t see what our path is ahead, not fully. Just bits and pieces that make no sense. But now I’ve met Suzuno, things will begin to get clearer. And as time goes on, I hope, I’ll know more.”

She smiled.

“In terms of your question, Tatara-san, I know a little of Genbu’s legend. I know that Genbu no Miko’s time in this world was harsh and she was often targeted by people offering rewards for her destruction. A Miko had never appeared before she did, therefore people were suspicious. And we must be prepared for anyone who feels the same about Suzuno in Sairou.”

“But Hokkan’s Miko brought them peace, despite that.” Tokaki objected. “So noone should hate Suzuno, if she can do that for Sairou.”

“I suppose that depends whether you belong to Byakko’s faith or the Imperial heresy.” Toroki’s expression clouded. “But that’s another story which for now can wait until another night. It’s already late, after all, and while I know a little about the two of you, I’m sure you know nothing about me.”

“If you weren’t so dusty, you might be attractive.” Tokaki eyed her speculatively. “Now we’re above ground I can finally get a good look at you, and you’re not as plain as I first thought. Do you dress like that all the time, Toroki? Because it’s a damn shame if you do. Women who dress in men’s rags do themselves no favours, you know.”

“Tokaki!” Suzuno exclaimed, shooting him a dark look, and Toroki laughed.

“I’ve not always dressed like this, no.” She said lightly. “But in the mountain, it’s been the best plan. I ***am*** *a smuggler, after all. You realise that, I hope? You’re now consorting with a potential criminal of the state… even, perhaps, an outlaw.”*

“You don’t seem too worried about that fact.” Suzuno sent her a sidelong glance, and Toroki shrugged.

“Byakko guides me. I don’t care about the Imperial court or what they do or don’t think is a crime.” She said flippantly. “I’m here to support you, Suzuno. In whatever way I’m able. Smuggler or not… that’s why I was born. And it’s what I’ll do from hereon in — till death, if need be.”

“I don’t want anyone to die over me!” Suzuno’s eyes widened in horror, and Tokaki nodded.

“You better not do anything self-sacrificial while you’re running with us.” He agreed, jabbing a finger in Toroki’s direction. “For one thing, it’s a waste of a life, and a potentially pretty life at that — I’d at least like to see how you clean up before you go spilling blood all over yourself in some do or die mission. And for another thing, we need all seven Seishi gathered together if we’re going to have any chance of summoning Byakko at all. Right? I might not know as much about this as you or Tatara, but even so…”

“That’s how the legend goes.” Toroki agreed. “Don’t worry. I don’t plan on relinquishing my life easily.”

She offered Suzuno a smile.

“But all Seishi are subject to their Miko’s need and will.” She added. “If it required it, I wouldn’t hesitate to take that decision. To die in Byakko’s name is to die with honour, after all.”

“Don’t.” Suzuno shivered. “I don’t want to think about death and all of that stuff. We’ll find the other… other four, wake Byakko and then everything will be all right. That’s what I want. I don’t want bloodshed. And I really don’t want anyone to die because of me.”

“We’re tougher than that, Suzuno-chan.” Tokaki assured her, reaching over to squeeze her arm reassuringly. “You’re stuck with us for a while, like it or not.”

“I think I’d rather that than being on my own in this place.” Suzuno admitted. “I don’t know if I like Sairou or not, yet. I really wouldn’t want to have to deal with all these strange things without help.”

“The Miko’s Seishi are drawn to her, one way or another.” Toroki said frankly. “Though some take more persuasion than others, I imagine.”

“Then what you showed me in the cave…?” Suzuno glanced at her, and Toroki shrugged her shoulders.

“For now, let’s not worry too much about that.” She said dismissively. “You came here because you were looking for Taikyoku-zan. Not because you were looking for me. And I can tell you that there’s no such mountain in these peaks. The Kanin range is associated with Byakko and holy things, true enough. But Taikyoku-zan is another kind of place completely. One which you can’t just go to when you feel like it. You have to prove your worth before you can even see it, let alone mount it and speak to Taiitsukun.”

“You sound like you know something about it.” Tokaki looked startled. “Are you saying you’ve been there, then?”

“Only in my dreams.” Toroki shook her head. “When I left… home and came into the desert, I was guided here by a voice that spoke to me when I slept. At first I thought it was Byakko, but as time went on I realised it wasn’t a tiger at all but something else. Something equally intangible and divine, and whose guidance I should follow… but not something that I had anticipated before. The voice told me that I would meet the Miko in these mountains after four years had passed, and that till that time came, I should take care of and preserve Byakko’s faith among the people who Sairou’s political system had forgotten.”

She shrugged.

“That was something close to my own heart, especially when I saw the plague and famine-ravaged villages that were being ignored.” She added. “On my journey here I saw many things that opened my eyes in a whole new way, if I’m honest. The court intrigues and the uncertainty in Arudo has meant that many people have suffered without anyone paying the slightest bit of notice. Local people fight among themselves. Lesser nobles raise armies and march on their neighbours’ land in order to claim valuable, coveted resources such as water and livestock and the overlords with Imperial blessing do nothing to keep their subordinates in check. Han-ke, Ueke-ke, Kei-ke, and even the royal house itself have forgotten the ordinary man in their struggles to maintain power. It’s a mess that’s heading towards anarchy and civil strife… and the thought leaves a bitter taste in the mouth of anyone who cares about this land’s prosperity.”

“Yes.” Tatara looked preoccupied. “I have heard such things also, Toroki-san. My family are Tsuonie-ke, as I’m sure you may realise, but I’m no longer an active part of that clan since my parents died. I’ve spent most of the last few years in one of Byakko’s holy houses, doing what I could with my powers to help the drought-struck villagers in the surrounding areas. But the little bits of communication I have from my sister at court

tend to be full of political wrangles and completely lacking in anything else. The court is not settled, therefore policies do not stick and the people suffer. You are not mistaken. Sairou's government is fragile and in danger of schism and collapse. And that, most probably, is the reason that Suzuno-sama was called here."

"I think so too." Toroki agreed. "And I'm glad we see things the same way. I had realised you were Tsuonie-ke, Tatara-san. Byakko had told me as much when I first saw your image in my mind's eye. But that you're of that mind — makes me relieved. Political allegiances are only likely to pull people back. If we start to get involved in court squabbles, I know that we will fail. I'm sure of it. That if we align ourselves with the powers that be in Arudo too strongly, we'll all fall by the wayside."

"It's a grim view." Tokaki said soberly, his usual mischief fading from his gold eyes as he digested his companions' political discussion. "I've heard Tatara talk that way before, and if you really can see stuff, Toroki, I guess it's more sinister than I really considered. I mean, in the desert lands, you're a long way from Arudo in any case. An' so long as you can live from one year to the next, other things don't really play a part. But if there's fighting and people are being killed without anyone stopping it… that's different."

"Very different." Suzuno murmured. "Is it really so bad as that, Toroki?"

"Mm." Toroki nodded her head, slipping her glove off her hand once more as she rubbed her mark against her skin. As white light glittered and sparked from her hands, she spread her fingers, creating once more a cloud of images that, little by little became more and more vivid. Tokaki let out an exclamation.

"How the hell..?"

"Another part of Toroki's power is projection of imagery." Toroki said frankly. "Into the air, or into the minds of an opponent or ally. This way is limited, since I'm drawing only on my own strength. But it's enough to give you an idea of the things I saw when I travelled to the mountains in the first place."

"It's terrible." Tatara said softly, taking a step towards the image and Suzuno heard the genuine pain in his tones as he surveyed the blood and devastation of the ransacked village, flames leaping up from the roofs of houses as men on horseback gave orders to raid and pillage the settlement's meagre supplies. "Sairou-jin against Sairou-jin. Even brother against brother, perhaps, if such a pitch has been reached."

"Exactly." Toroki said, her expression troubled. "As you say, Tatara-

san. Brother on brother. In some areas, younger brothers of lesser noble families have tried to usurp their siblings and then force the people in their territory to submit and swear allegiance to them through campaigns of force and terror. The desert land is the least desirable, Tokaki, so your home has not been targeted yet. But in areas where the best resources are dotted around, this is already happening. Around Arudo and the surrounding land — even as far across as Eiroku and the foot of these mountains — people are already dying because of greed and uncertainty. And it doesn't end there."

She clapped her hands together as the images disappeared into mist.

"There's also the matter of faith." She added. "Byakko's faith is not as strong as it should be. Partly because of all this unrest, and partly because of court fashion. I don't want to spent a long time discussing it… suffice it to say that a foreign born heresy has invaded the Imperial house and it's creating divides throughout the whole of Sairou's nobility and clans alike. Little by little it's permeating through communities and splitting them into groups based on their loyalties and their beliefs. And those loyal to Byakko are the ones being most victimised."

Tokaki's brows knitted together.

"Then we damn well have to stamp that out." He said firmly. "With Byakko's help, we'll show them who the real protectors of Sairou are… and we'll glue all these splits back together into one country. Hokkan managed it without self-destructing, so we can do it too. There are already three of us here, after all. And Suzuno, too. That makes four. We're halfway to our goal. If we can find the other Seishi and talk them around, we can make a difference. That's what you're saying, basically, isn't it? You've sat here four years waiting for Suzuno and us to turn up so you could spew all this at us and make us aware of what's going on in the bigger picture. Right?"

"As you say." Toroki smiled. "You're smarter than you look, Tokaki."

"Shut up." Tokaki grimaced at her. "I'm young, and I flirt, but I'm not an idiot. I can process ideas as well as the next person."

Suzuno drew a heavy breath into her lungs, trying to calm the wave of panic that had begun to stir inside of her at Toroki's words.

"It's not going to be as easy as it sounds, though." She whispered. "Is it?"

"Nothing worth winning ever is." Toroki told her soberly. "Are you prepared for a struggle, Suzuno? I'm serious. If you aren't, we might as well find a way to send you home now. Your heart has to be in Byakko's

name, or it won't work. Just saying it isn't enough. If you really want to help the people here, well, you're the only one who can be the catalyst for change and make things happen. But if you don't…"

She trailed off, and Suzuno closed her eyes, digesting this carefully. Then, at length, she met the prophet's gaze.

"I want to go home." She said honestly. "And I'm scared of everything you've said. But those people… suffering like that… it was terrible. You said it, but seeing it was worse. People being hurt and killed and I can do something about it, so I can't run away and not do it. I meant that, when I said it before. So I don't know a lot of things. And I'm starting to realise that it's dangerous and people can die in this world as much as they could in my world. Me included. But even so, even if I knew a way to get back, I couldn't just go."

She swallowed hard.

"Even though it cost Takiko-neechan her life, she stayed and she succeeded." She added softly. "I'm terrified of dying, and I won't pretend otherwise. I know that coming here was part of the reason Takiko-neechan was killed. But even so, she felt it was important enough to come here. And she helped all the people in the north by being that brave and that strong."

She sighed, taking a moment to compose herself as she tried to put her thoughts into words. They were all watching her intently, she realised, hope and apprehension in each of their gazes, and in that instant she knew she could not let them down.

"I was always a little in awe of Takiko-neechan's courage and determination." She said. "I've never been so strong as she was, not ever. And my Father has always protected me because of what happened to her, so I've never reached out and made choices on my own. But this one… this one I have to make. And I'm making it."

Slowly she met the gazes of each of her Seishi in turn, then held out her hand.

"For Byakko and for Sairou." She said, her voice shaking slightly. "I'm ready."

Tokaki's roguish features twitched into a smile and he reached out to grasp her fingers firmly in his.

"Me too." He said frankly. "Whatever they throw at us, I'm ready, too."

Tatara nodded, placing his own palm over the top of theirs.

"I also." He agreed. "For Sairou's sake, I'm willing to fight."

Toroki replaced her glove on her right hand, then, very purposefully reached across to grasp the others' together in her grip.

"For Sairou's sake." She echoed. "And Byakko's, too. We ***will*** *do this!"*

Almost as soon as she finished speaking, there was a bright flash of brilliant white light and Suzuno covered her eyes with her free hand as the glow grew more and more encompassing, spreading out across the mountains as it seemed to illuminate every nook and cranny in its pearl-like sheen.

"Well said, Servants of Byakko."

The voice echoed out of the brightness, and Toroki let out an exclamation at the sound of the words.

"That voice! That voice is…"

"You remember me, Toroki?"

As the light began to fade, Suzuno blinked, trying to bring the scene into clearer focus. As she did so, she realised that the entire landscape had changed and that instead of the dark, barren zigzags of the Kanin mountains, they were surrounded on every side by lakes and mounds in vivid colours, stretching out for miles around.

"Good. Then that saves me some time at the very least."

"What the…" Tokaki breathed, staring around him in disbelief, and Tatara's eyes widened.

"Could it be… Taikyoku-zan?" He whispered, and Suzuno frowned, shooting him a startled look.

"Taikyoku-zan?" She repeated. "But… how is that possible? Toroki already said that it wasn't in the Kanin mountains, and we haven't gone anywhere… have we?"

"Your heart is the only guide that can lead you to my mountain, Byakko no Miko."

The voice echoed out of the heavens once more, and with a shrieking cry a bird of prey arced over their heads, hovering as it spread its wings in the bright sunlight. Suzuno stared at it, memory flickering at her senses as she realised where she had seen the creature before.

"Shouki-mura." She murmured. "You…"

"Very observant of you."

The bird did not seem to speak, yet Suzuno knew somehow that the voice came from within the creature's glistening form.

“Yes, Byakko no Miko. I was in Shouki-mura, observing the commitment and courage of Byakko’s chosen. You have done well, all of you, so far. Your resolve and strength have unlocked the door to the place you seek. This is indeed Taikyoku-zan. The place where only those true of heart and spirit may come.”

“I see.” Tatara’s expression began to clear. “You mean that rather than being a place you can properly walk to, Taikyoku-zan exists in a different space from everything else? That it’s something we find inside of ourselves, rather than by looking on a map?”

“You can view it so, Tatara, if you wish.” *The bird agreed.* “The place exists, but it is only accessible by the most deserving. Many will pass straight by and never see what you see now. You have passed the first hurdle, and now you have, I can help you.”

“You…?” Tokaki frowned. “You’re a bird… aren’t you? I don’t understand. How are you talking to us?”

“It’s not a bird.” Toroki shook her head. “Can’t you sense the spiritual aura? We might see a hawk, but that… that’s Taiitsukun. The voice, the spiritual sense… I’m sure of it. That’s Taiitsukun who’s talking to us. The bird is simply an illusion. It’s not real.”

“Your wits are sharp, Toroki.”

The voice seemed amused by this, and the bird twitched its wings, letting out another raucous cry.

“Yes, you are correct. My true form is concealed from you because you do not need to see it. Besides, it is an amusement for me to choose different shapes in which to make myself known to people. I am indeed Taiitsukun of Taikyoku-zan. It is my counsel that you seek.”

“You’re really Taiitsukun?” Suzuno’s eyes lit up with hope. “And you can help us? Oh! Do you know where the other Byakko Seishi are?”

“Yes, and no.” *Taiitsukun agreed gravely.* “I know where their spirits reside. Whether or not they are truly Byakko’s people is for you to ascertain.”

The bird hovered more closely to Suzuno, and absently the girl reached out to touch the glimmering bronze feathers.

“You’re so beautiful.” She murmured. “I thought so in the village and now I know why. You’re not an ordinary hawk, but something more special. If you can help us any, Taiitsukun, please, help us. I want to stop people dying in Sairou if there’s some way that I can.”

“Then you should head for the capital, Arudo, and visit the court

there." *Came the response*. "You will find answers there to many questions. The next one you seek hides in the shadows of the Imperial palace, after all."

*"**No**." Toroki said firmly, and Tokaki turned to cast her a quizzical look.*

"No?" He repeated. "Why not? If there's one of us in Arudo, shouldn't we go and find them? I thought you weren't concerned with being strung up for smuggling. Were you lying?"

"I don't want to go to Arudo." Toroki ignored Tokaki, raising her gaze to the bird. "Not yet. Please, Taiitsukun, I don't think that we're ready for what we might face there. There are powerful forces beyond our control, and I don't want to put Suzuno in danger when there are so few of us and we're so new to our task."

"I see." *The hawk circled once more, this time hovering before the prophet and fixing her with its beady, predatorial gaze.* "You have reasons for not going to Arudo, Toroki?"

"I do." Toroki agreed. "I don't think that taking Suzuno there now would be a good idea. Please, Taiitsukun, if you understand that, then help us find more of our brethren before we tackle such a dangerous place. The Emperor is not someone we can talk to, and the Empress is a danger to all who follow Byakko's path."

"Is this a prophesy of danger, or a personal feeling, my child?"

"It's a conviction." Toroki responded. "I am certain, Taiitsukun, that if we go to Arudo now, something terrible will happen."

There was a moment of silence, then the hawk stretched its wings.

"The decision must be yours. Not mine." *Came the voice once again*. "There are other clues I can give you, if you choose not to go to Arudo yet. But I hope you won't regret the delay. You seek to avoid bloodshed, but perhaps you might cause it. There are many uncertainties, Toroki. Your sight cannot see them all until they are close to being a reality. By that point, maybe, it will be too late to change them. Do you understand? You will protect Suzuno's safety by going elsewhere, true enough. But in the end…"

"I'm sure." Toroki shook her head. "I mean it, Taiitsukun. You understand, I know you do. So please. Give us another lead. Another clue. Somewhere else we can try before we go to the court."

"Are you sure?" Tatara frowned. "I'm reluctant to go to court as yet, but if Taiitsukun thinks…"

“If Toroki doesn’t think it’s a good idea, then I’ll back her up.” Suzuno said quietly, and Toroki shot her a startled look, gratitude in her emerald gaze. “I trust her, and I think she has good reasons not to go to Arudo just yet. Besides, I don’t feel very strong right at the moment. And whether it’s being a coward or not, I don’t know. But I’d like it if we could find a few more people before we went somewhere truly dangerous.”

There was another pause, then,

“In which case, your path should be for Kaidou.” *The bird sounded resigned.* “You will find one there who bears a celestial mark.”

“Kaidou?” Tokaki repeated. “By the sea?”

“The sea?” Suzuno’s eyes lit up, and Tatara nodded.

“Kaidou is a port.” He agreed. “A busy one, too. And one of Byakko’s people is there, Taiitsukun?”

“Yes.”

“I suppose it doesn’t matter what order we gather people in, so long as we gather them in the end.” Tokaki pursed his lips. “Toroki, you’re sure about doing it this way? With your sight and all, this is what you think we should do?”

“I have no doubts.” Toroki shook her head. “We should go to Kaidou.”

“Then I guess that’s where we’re going.” Tokaki reflected. “To the coast.”

“It’s a long journey from the mountains to the sea.” Tatara mused. “It will be many days walk.”

“Walk?” Suzuno bit her lip, glancing down at her already aching feet. “Taiitsukun, is that true? Do we really have to walk a whole long way to get to Kaidou?”

“You are a precious Miko indeed, if you’re afraid to use your feet.” *There was a faintly mocking tone in the bird’s voice, and Suzuno bristled.*

“It’s not that!” She protested. “I’m just not a good walker, and I’d feel stupid if someone had to carry me. But if we go at my pace, we might never get there. It’s not like we have all the time in the world… I’m worried. That’s all.”

The bird flapped its wings, letting out a shriek that pierced the heavens, then,

“I suppose you want me to drop you somewhere nearby.” *The voice said reluctantly.* “And I should know better than to pander to the

whims of young girls. But this once, Byakko no Miko, I will do your bidding. I will send you to Kaidou with my magic, and save you all that walking."

"Really?" Suzuno's eyes lit up, and the hawk nodded its head.

"But I will not help you to find the one you seek once there." *The voice warned.* "You will have to use your own instincts and senses to do that. I cannot do your duty for you, after all. And if I send you there, I cannot help you search."

"That's all right. We'll manage." Toroki assured her. "I'm quite good at sensing chi, and I'm sure I'll pick something up when we're there."

"Then I suppose there's no more to say." *The bird responded.* "Except, of course, to wish you all the best of luck."

Chapter 7

Chapter Six

Considering that this was a palace, security really was lax.

Makiko hovered in the shadowy hallways that connected the Princess Consort's quarters to the rest of the palace, watching with derision the bevy of people who headed forwards and backwards to the central area of command. Though there were soldiers enough on duty, none of them even glanced her way, and Makiko felt her contempt growing with each passing moment.

So Sairou's royal household were as spiritually dead now as they had been a century ago, then. For some reason, that did not surprise her.

But there was still this Ueke.

Of all the people of blood and breeding she had observed since her arrival in Arudo, only Sashi's aura had glittered with even the faintest of spiritual impulses. The Ueke, Makiko remembered, were well known across Sairou for their worthless protective charms and their devotion to the imaginary spirit known as Kitora. When she had been alive, she had scorned them and their delusions, following every path possible to bend and break their piety. Yet now she realised that rooted in their lunacy was some seed of usefulness, if in some way she, once Queen Consort of the West, could harness that ability and use it to further her cause.

Tenkou's destruction had cost her more dearly than she could have realised, even holed up behind the seal within Kumo-zan's unusual cavern. That she had depended so much on his dark magic was a shock even to one who had considered herself his most loyal of servants, and bitterly she rued having allowed herself to be imprisoned so easily by those who had been mere stars of Byakko. It had not been the Tiger himself who had confined her, she remembered darkly, but the spells of heathens bound together by values that she did not understand. Yet because of their actions she had not been there to fight for Tenkou's cause, even though his influence had given her eternity. Absently a part of her wondered whether her master had been angry or grieved by her incapacitation, or whether he had even noticed her absence at all. She would never know for sure, for Tenkou had been completely destroyed, and the

shards of magic he had pulled together to sustain him and other demons in his service had been scattered all across the ShijinTenchisho like harmless drops of rain.

Throughout this life and death struggle Makiko had remained a prisoner, feeling every single spiritual change in the atmosphere that surrounded her, yet being completely unable to make her presence felt. Byakko's barrier had held firm, even created as it had been by human incantation, and for what had seemed like an eternity, she had been in limbo, uncertain as to when she would get her chance to act once more.

Still, at last, Toroki's prediction had come to pass and she was free, at the very least, to avenge herself on those who had so chained her. Her curse still lived, for the seven souls across which it had been cast still existed, and so long as that was the case, anything was possible. She was no ordinary spirit, she mused to herself pensively. She was one who had turned against crossing over to the care of the Emperor of the Heavens. She was Tenkou's creation, and because of it, her existence was eternal. And eternity was plenty of time in which to ensure that vengeance was served in the most elaborate and painful of ways.

With this pleasing thought still flickering over her senses, Makiko slipped neatly through the crack between the great wooden door's hinges and the wall, spreading her shapeless, imageless form into the chamber as she set her sights on her prey. The Princess Consort was seated at her mirror, carefully brushing out her thick waves of hair in readiness for bed, but at the spirit's intrusion she paused, hesitating slightly as she glanced around her for any sign of company. At her response, Makiko's hope flared anew.

So the Ueke could sense her presence. She was the best possible vessel for the time being.

"Is someone there?" Sashi set her brush down, her brow furrowing in confusion. "Show yourselves — who are you?"

"I wonder if you can see me, Ueke no Hime-sama." Without vocal chords, Makiko knew she could not speak the words, but yet she projected them into the ether, every sense straining for any sign of Sashi's comprehension. At her words, Sashi's eyes widened, and she pushed back her chair, getting to her feet.

"Someone *is* there." She murmured, bringing her fingers up automatically in a gesture of protection. "A spirit, perhaps? Whoever you are, you're not of this Earth — why do you come to me, Spirit?

What do you need from a daughter of the Ueke?"

Makiko shifted her essence out of the shadows, hovering against the flickering flame of Sashi's brightly burning fire.

"You have awareness." She observed softly. "And I seek to use it to the greatest extent I can."

"Awareness?" Sashi frowned, biting her lip in confusion. "Where are you, spirit? Show yourself. Let me see you and judge you as you are."

"Judge?" This amused Makiko, as she felt humour spread through to every single part of her being. "No. Judgement is my job. Not the job of a North Sairou noblewoman, when faced with a Queen."

"A… Queen?" Despite herself Sashi took a step backwards. "I don't understand. What are you saying?"

Makiko drew the fragments of her scattered being together, as little by little they began to form the vague outline of her former self. As she did so, Sashi's hand flew to her mouth, her eyes big with disbelief.

"The crown of Sairou." She whispered. "You're the spirit… of a *former* Queen? An… Empress of Sairou, now passed to Byakko's care?"

"*Byakko*'s care?" Makiko snorted, shaking her head as the very tips of her hair became blurred and indistinct. "No. I was never in Byakko's care and I have no intention of ever being so. You are a fool, Ueke no Hime. But yet…"

She drew forward, pushing her spectral face closer to Sashi's startled human one as she gauged the flickering of her companion's aura.

"You can see me, can't you?" She murmured. "Even though I have not had physical form in a century or more, you can still see enough of me to know me as an Empress of your land. Your fellows have all ignored me. None of them are aware enough to even pick up on the fact that I'm there. But you are different. You *know* I'm there."

"I can see you." Sashi gathered her wits, though Makiko could tell that her mind was whirling. "But I still don't understand why a former Queen would suddenly choose now to visit me? I'm not even of Sairou's royal blood. I married the Prince, but he is your descendant, not me. I'm Ueke, like you said… I don't see why you'd want to speak to me. Surely, if you have a message for your family, it should be done through Nefuru or, more, the Emperor himself?"

Makiko chuckled.

“My family are dead to me, as I am to them.” She said frankly. “They have no spiritual ability to speak of, more’s the pity. But they never have had, either. Politically astute they may be, but they have no time to parley with ghosts. No, Ueke no Hime. You are the only one who has enough ability to hear me. You are the only one to whom I can come.”

Sashi was silent for a moment. Then she scooped her robe from the back of her chair, wrapping it around her shoulders as she sank down onto the end of her bed.

“Then speak to me, Naki-kisai-sama.” She said softly. “Tell me your message for your family. If I can, I will deliver it — though whether or not they will believe me, I don’t know.”

“My message?” Makiko paused, gauging the fact that her opponent’s guard had begun to relax. “Yes. I have a message. One I’ve waited a hundred years to fully convey. Do you know my name, Ueke no Hime? I know yours, as I have sought you out. Do you know mine?”

“No.” Sashi admitted, a pink colour touching her cheeks. “My family have always had close ties with this court, but I only came here to marry Nefuru when it was time for him to take a wife. Before that, I never left the Northern Province. I don’t know much about the history of the Royal House — Nefuru doesn’t much speak of it, and I only hear the little bits and pieces that are spoken of in speeches or addresses made by the Emperor himself. I know you wear the colours of a Queen, yuurei-sama, but more than that…”

“It’s well.” Makiko assured her, reaching out a ghostly finger to brush Sashi’s cheek, and at the faint prickling of her touch the woman gasped, flinching back. “I’ll tell you, because we are soon to be far more *closely* acquainted. My name is Makiko, Ueke no Hime. Makiko of the East. The Consort of Meishitei, the assassinated Queen of Sairou.”

“Makiko of the…” Sashi’s eyes widened and Makiko felt a glow of humour and derision swirl up within her.

“Then you know my name?”

Sashi’s expression became clouded and wary, as slowly she nodded her head.

“I do.” She murmured. “But it is a name never spoken among royal society. The records denounce it and all references to such a person are sealed in places that very few people can ever reach. I do not

know what was done to deserve such a reaction — all I know is that none will ever speak of her. She was a Princess from Kutou who came to be wed to Meishitei-heika. She died and left issue to continue the royal line. That is all that is ever said about Makiko of the East."

Makiko let out a low chuckle as she registered the increasing tension in Sashi's young body. Slowly she nodded.

"So it is." She said frankly. "So my existence has been for the past hundred years. Murdered in my own palace. Slain at the hands of my son's right hand man. Betrayed by all and sundry on account of my faith and my ethnicity. Gone and forgotten, confined and pushed away so that no one ever knows about Makiko, the Empress who was slaughtered and despised by the people she came to help enlighten."

Sashi did not reply, and Makiko's ghostly lips twitched into a smile.

"Ah, but you won't believe me, even though your own child has my blood running through his veins." She reflected. "No matter. As I said, you'll soon understand. You see, the afterlife is eternal, Ueke no Hime. Those who do not pass through Heaven's gates can spend as long as they like drifting around the world they were once a part of. But to act in it — to be a part of that world once more — they need things they no longer have. Physical form. The ability to be seen by the stupid who cannot even sense a spirit that hovers across their path. You are the key to that lock for me, Sashi of the Ueke-ke. You have enough ability to see me, and hear the things I say."

"Hear you, yes. Act for you… I haven't said anything of the sort." Sashi shook her head. "If you think you can use me as some form of messenger… my loyalties are to Nefuru and my son, and you'll never change that."

"I don't intend to use you as a messenger." Makiko assured her, drawing herself ever closer to the young woman's body as she did so. "I intend on using *you*, body and soul. I don't wish to make an ally of you. I wish to *become* you — or at least hollow out your body to use as my tool. Your spiritual awareness makes you vulnerable to my actions. You see me, and you hear me. Therefore I can invade you and control you. Your foolish husband may be thick as a plank when it comes to ghosts and auras, but you have enough magical sensibilities to be at least vaguely useful to me. And I must take whatever implements are available… even if it's only Ueke charm magic, it's better than nothing at all."

"Wait a minute!" Sashi's hand instinctively closed around the tree-pendant that hung at her throat, pulling it loose as she held it up as a

talisman. “I’m not going to be anyone’s puppet! I’m not afraid of ghosts and it isn’t the first time a spirit has come to me with a message, so I gave you the benefit of the doubt. But the dead are dead. Gone. If you chose not to go beyond Heaven’s Gate that’s up to you, but I won’t be used as some kind of weapon against people that I love. If you know that I’m Ueke then you know that my charms are charms of protection as much as anything else. And by Kitora’s grace I won’t let you hurt me… by Kitora’s grace I’ll cast you from here myself!”

As she spoke, the charm glittered faintly with white light, but Makiko’s lips twitched into a smile.

“Byakko magic. How I despise it.” She murmured. “Unfortunately for you, though, your power is paltry compared with the strength of my vengeance. You don’t have the strength of his stellar chosen locked inside of you, and you cannot fight one like me who has been boiling with anger and hatred for so many years. Loathing brings with it its own strength, Ueke no Sashi-hime. And that strength can snap your will… just like snapping a twig.”

She focused her energy on the charm, and Sashi’s eyes widened as the silver pendant juddered violently then shot out of her grip, the pearl coming away from the metal as it clattered into pieces on the floor. Before she could react, Makiko took her chance, forcing her own will forward as she surged resolutely towards the young woman’s body. As she poured into it, she felt Sashi’s struggles to resist her, aware of clawing at the arms that were little by little becoming her own, and the desperate cry of a voice that soon she would use to command the people around her.

Soon, however, Makiko’s bitter, dark resolve broke through Sashi’s fight to retain control of her body, piercing through to the girl’s memories and emotions as little by little she absorbed every part of the Princess Consort’s sheltered, privileged life. As she did so, amusement flared in her soul and she laughed, hearing Sashi’s own tones ring out through the chamber as she made herself more comfortable inside her new temporary home.

“Better than the child in the mountain.” She spoke softly, Sashi’s northern accent edging her words with an unfamiliar tinge. “There is spiritual power, at the very least. If I’m to achieve my goal, I’ll need to do better — but in the meantime, this works as well as anything. At least now I’m somewhat more prepared… even if it’s only Ueke magic, for the time being it will have to do!”

“You know, you’re quite deft with your fingers, Haruka-chan.”

As the apothecary dropped her bundle of cut herbs into the basin to drain, Haruka glanced up from where she had been carefully segregating plants into their relevant types, absently wiping her damp hands on her clothing as she did so.

“You learn quickly, too. With your help I’ve got through this twice as fast today.”

“Well, I don’t take favours and not repay them.” Haruka frowned, meeting the apothecary’s gaze for a moment. “Though it doesn’t mean I’m going to work for you all the time… you know that, right? I only helped you this morning because you fed me last night an’ gave me some place to sleep. An’ I figure it’s a fair trade, that way.”

“A very fair trade.” Anara agreed. “And I’m glad you’re still here this morning. You don’t seem as washed out or tired as you did yesterday, and I think a night’s sleep did you a lot of good. A good meal or two, too.”

She reached across for the cloth to wipe her hands, eying her charge quizzically.

“Will you stay again tonight? The desert is dangerous and if you’re on your own…”

“I know.” Despite herself Haruka sighed, her gaze drifting to the window and the winding path that led from the heart of Shouki-mura towards the trader’s path and the mountains beyond. “On my own… I guess so.”

She shook her head.

“But I ain’t yours, so I don’t belong here.” She concluded. “So that’s what I’ll have to do. I can manage. I’ve done so till now.”

“I know.” Anara rested a gentle hand on her shoulder. “But there’s no hurry. My husband and I both don’t mind if you’re here, you know. The house hasn’t had a child in it for some time, and this family… we’ve never been quite like other families in a lot of ways. You’re welcome to stay as long as you like. If you’re frightened of something — or in some kind of trouble — then let this be your safe haven. All right? You’re a strong child, I’ve no doubt about that… but you don’t have to face the harsh world all by yourself.”

“I do.” Haruka’s expression became solemn, a haunted look in her vivid eyes. “Now. I told you already, didn’t I? I don’t have a family. And I’m not looking to find one, either… nothing like that. I just…”

She sighed, sinking down onto the wooden bench and burying her

head in her hands.

“You wouldn’t want me to stay here, anyhow. Not if you knew what I was. What I did.” She said, her words muffled through her fingers as she avoided Anara’s gaze. “You’re a real kind person, Anara-san. Geiyo-san is, too. You were kind to me yesterday, an’ you’re still bein’ kind to me today. So it makes me feel bad, when I know you think I’m just some kid from the desert who has no place to go. If you really knew me… you’d want me a long way away from here. And I don’t want to hurt you — or anyone else — by staying here.”

Anara paused, eying the young girl for a moment. Then she sat down at her side.

“I think you’d be surprised at how much it takes to frighten me.” She said softly. “That’s the truth. So tell me, Haruka. Are there people after you? People who want to hurt you? Is that what you were running away from? City officials or… something else?”

“City officials?” Haruka’s head jerked up and she snorted, shaking her head. “No way. Not a chance. They might chase you round the city itself, but once you clear the boundaries you’re someone else’s problem. An’ I know all the ways in an’ out of Eiroku that they don’t. If I gotta go over roofs or under bridges, I will. They couldn’t catch me if they wanted to — fat, overdressed idiots. I’m not scared of them.”

Despite herself, Anara laughed, and Haruka looked confused.

“What’s funny?”

“Just the way you describe them, even though they’re armed with swords.” Anara told her. “You really aren’t frightened of them, are you?”

“I only take stuff to live off. Not because I’m greedy.” Haruka said frankly. “An’ if they cut off my hand, then it’d be twice as hard to grab stuff. So I ain’t likely to let myself get caught by anyone, given that. I’m fast, . An’ small. So people don’t notice me even slippin’ between the stalls.”

She eyed her companion plaintively.

“Do you think it’s bad, doin’ that? I don’t, but then, if you think I’m goin’ to steal shit from you too…”

“I don’t think you need to steal anything from us.” Anara said evenly. “Because if and when you leave, you’re welcome to take food and supplies with you. It’s not stealing if I’m happy for you to have it, . No, Haruka. I don’t think it’s bad. I can’t say that it’s right — but

sometimes you have to survive whatever way you can."

Haruka let out her breath in a rush.

"You're the first grown up who's ever seen it that way." She admitted. "That's why I stayed here last night. You ain't the same as the people in most places. You don't see me as just another vagabond kid, do you?"

"I don't." Anara agreed, tapping her gently on the arm. "But I do think that you're hiding something. And whatever it is is worrying you. Last night, in your sleep, when I came to close the window, you said something. It sounded like a name… Hamiko? Something like that?"

Despite herself Haruka froze, staring up at her companion in consternation.

"I… I said that?"

"You did." Anara agreed. "I thought maybe it was a friend of yours."

Haruka's gaze dropped.

"She died." She said flatly. "And so she's not one any more."

"I'm sorry." Anara said softly. "I didn't realise. So you weren't out there on your own, then? Hamiko was with you?"

"And others. But not now. Not after yesterday." Haruka held up her hands. "I don't want to talk about it, Anara-san. So don't try and make me. If you knew, you'd think I was evil, just like Azuhi and… and it doesn't matter. So we won't talk about it any more. I can help some more with the herbs, . Can't I?"

She got to her feet, moving back towards the basin of herbs.

"What do we do to them next?"

Anara pursed her lips, making no attempt to return to her task, and Haruka eyed her warily, realising that the woman was considering something carefully.

At length she sighed, nodding her head.

"Does it have something to do with the white mark you have on your chest?" She asked quietly, and Haruka looked stricken, a chill touching her spine.

"What about it?" She demanded defensively, clutching her arms to her body as if somehow she could conceal its existence. "It's just a

mark. A birthmark. It ain't important."

"A birthmark that's only there sometimes?" Anara raised an eyebrow. "It was there when I bathed you, but it vanished again afterwards."

"I didn't ask you to do that, so it's none of your business!"

"Probably not." Anara agreed. "But I'm interested, anyway. I told you before that I'd known other people marked that way, didn't I? I didn't think I'd ever meet anyone else in this lifetime. But I suppose I was wrong. And I don't think it's an accident that, , you came to my village or wound up at my home."

She turned, gazing at the youngster seriously.

"You see, the other two people I knew were my children. My son Miramu and my daughter Myoume." She added softly. "And each of them, because of it, had a specific kind of magic born into them which made them different from the people around them. It's the same for you, isn't it? You have some kind of magic too, even though you don't want to tell me what it is."

"Your… *children*?" Slowly Haruka lowered her arms, reaching across to brush her chest briefly with the index finger of her right hand. "Had marks like this? And magic? *Both* of them?"

"Yes." Anara agreed. "Myoume's on her finger tip, and Miramu on his throat."

"But… what kind of magic?" Despite herself, Haruka felt curiosity welling up inside of her. "Were they good people or bad people, your children? What happened? Why did they leave the village?"

"Ah, now you want to know." Anara smiled, patting her gently on the head. "All right. I suppose those are fair questions, and I'll do my best to answer them as honestly as I can. But you have to realise that as a mother, I have a certain amount of bias. I love them both dearly, even now. No matter what… I always will."

"No matter what." Haruka murmured. "Then they were… are… bad people?"

"No." Anara shook her head. "I wouldn't say it about either of them. Their gifts made them different, true enough. And they found it difficult, at times, to master that side of themselves alongside any kind of normal life. But I really don't think evil had anything to do with it. I'm sure of it, in fact."

She reached out to take Haruka's hand, pulling her back down

gently on the bench beside her.

“My son Miramu passed away just more than a year and a half ago now.” She said gravely. “He was troubled till the end by the magic he had and the manner in which he had come to have it. He did bad things because of it, and he was both frightened and lonely — trapped by his own actions and his own fears. For a long time he tried to deny the magic was even there, and fought to ignore it. But , he embraced it. In doing so, he protected his sister’s life, and helped save everyone from destruction. But even that wasn’t enough to calm his troubled heart. He took his own life, and Myoume brought his ashes home for me to scatter here.”

“He… killed himself?” Haruka felt a wave of sympathy touch her heart, as she saw the genuine emotion in her companion’s eyes.

“Yes, he did.” Anara agreed sadly. “But despite the bad things he did, I still am proud of him. For, , doing what was right.”

“And… your daughter? Myoume-san? What about her?”

“Myoume… Myoume always embraced her magic and the duty it gave her.” Anara twisted her fingers together in her lap. “No matter how much pain it brought her, she persevered. A year and a half ago that power allowed her to help raise Seiryuu over Kutou. In doing so, she helped save the whole world from the evil that lurked at the Eastern court.”

She smiled.

“Now, she’s married, and soon, Byakko willing, she’ll birth a healthy child of her own.” She added. “She stayed in Kutou, since her husband is a military official there and she didn’t want to leave his side. But though I miss her, I don’t wish her back here. She has happiness, now, and a normal life, as far as that goes. She was always very strong… she deserves everything she’s achieved.”

Haruka closed her eyes for a moment, digesting this. Then, at length, she sighed.

“So if you run away from it, bad stuff happens to you — but if you don’t, it’ll be okay? Is that what you’re telling me?” She asked bluntly. “Cos it sure sounds like it.”

“I don’t know.” Anara admitted. “I don’t know how it works to know if that’s true of other people too, or just my children. But Byakko called them to arms, and now he’s calling you, Haruka. It can’t be a coincidence that it’s my house you came to — the one place where people understand properly the burdens on a child when it

comes to Byakko's magic."

"Byakko?" Shock flickered in Haruka's bright eyes. "This has something to do with Byakko?"

"It has everything to do with him." Anara agreed. "The mark you have on your chest is the mark of Subaru, Haruka. One of the stellar warriors of the Tiger God of the West. When Sairou is in danger, there are seven spirits who can be called to fight in his name for peace and freedom across this land. A hundred years ago, such an event happened, and Sairou has known peace ever since. My daughter and son were the reincarnations of original Seishi, born to carry out specific duties that none but them could do. And now, you… it must be the same for you. The mark on your chest is the mark of the warrior Subaru — and it means you've been reincarnated for Byakko's purpose. Whatever it might be."

Haruka's eyes widened with disbelief.

"No way." She whispered, clutching hold of the fabric of her gown as she stared at the apothecary in shock. "You can't be serious. I'm just a kid… a desert rat, that's all. And Byakko… Byakko is the God who protects folk. Right? If that's so… he wouldn't…"

She faltered, tears springing into her eyes, and Anara slipped an arm around her shoulders.

"Will you tell me what you're so worried about?" She asked gently. "Byakko's magic is powerful and difficult to manage, and it comes in all different shapes and sizes. Your power is not the same as Myoume's or Miramu's, but I'm sure that it's there. You have some magic inside of you, and if it's that which is scaring you, then…"

"Don't." Haruka shook her head, pushing the apothecary's kind arm away as she scrambled to her feet. "You don't understand. My magic is horrible. Horrible! It's evil and nasty and it hurts people! And I don't want it!"

"Haruka…"

"It doesn't matter what you say!" Haruka cut across her, shaking her head bitterly. "It's horrible, evil, nasty magic and *I want it to go away*!"

With that she turned on her heel, fleeing the workroom as fast as her legs would carry her. Tears blurring her vision, she pushed open the back door of the property, heading out into the village even as she heard Anara call her name.

“You don’t understand, Anara-san.” She muttered, ignoring the odd stares of the local people as she headed for the safety and seclusion of a cluster of trees at the edge of the settlement. “Your son and daughter were different from me. I’m just a kid… a kid who does bad things to people she cares about. A kid who’s bad luck — and I’ll bring bad luck to you too, if I stay. This isn’t Byakko’s magic. It’s something else — something evil. And I… I shouldn’t be around anybody until I can figure out how to get rid of it!”

So that was Subaru.

From the overhanging boughs of the trees, a sole figure crouched, unnoticed by the tearful child that had curled up against the willow’s ancient, rugged bark. As the girl buried her head in her arms, shaking with the force of her emotion, he felt a faint flicker of derision stir inside of his soul.

Well, so it didn’t get any easier.

He sighed, sinking back against the branch as he contemplated the situation so far.

Seven stars that made up the Western sky, and it was his responsibility — no, his *honour-bound duty,* now — to ensure that this time everything went according to the Tiger’s plan. Yet even since he had accepted the challenge, doubts had plagued him — doubts that had grown as he had sensed the awakening spirit of the young girl so close to the blessed mountains. Deep within that place, he knew, the bodies of original Seishi slept in perpetuity, undisturbed by either travellers or elements as their bones slowly became one with the arid soil of their homeland. Yet also in that network of tunnels had lingered a foul, tainted spirit — and now, thanks to the foolishness of one small girl, hell had once more been unleashed across the West.

Perhaps it would have been better had he refused, he reflected ruefully. An eternity stuck between light and darkness seemed a small price to pay in comparison to the alternative. He had forgotten the many reasons why he had disliked this life, but as he sat there, watching the child who bore Subaru’s spirit cry out her woes, he felt them all trickling back.

Absently his hand went to his chest as he felt something tighten, as if closing itself around his heart. He scowled at the sensation, inwardly berating the futility of his own actions. Even now, he reflected, he was too conditioned to react like they did. That no matter how many memories or how much knowledge he had to draw

on, he could only disassociate himself so far.

Memories were a poison in their own right, he mused darkly. And yet, in the heart of these memories was the very thing that had brought him here in the first place. The original Subaru had not brought the prophesy true, yet it had still come true, and he could not blame this pitiful, straggly young girl for that fact. She *was*, , just a child — a child who knew nothing yet of Byakko's war against the demon that still poisoned both his land and his Seishi. She was *not* the strong, resolute Hamu Dourin who had fought against the curse and won, living into old age with a courage and wit all of her own. Of all of Byakko's people, Dourin alone had been able to use her magic to forcibly keep Makiko's black magic at bay.

But, he reflected, that had been then, and this was now. Her spirit had been reborn, true enough, but no matter how hard he looked, the figure could not see any likeness between that bold, brave warrior and this shivering, scared ragamuffin. A desert rat, he reflected. A child with no connections or home — an orphan of the sands with neither literacy nor shelter to call her own. And yet in the heart of this one beat that power which had defied Makiko for a century.

Inwardly he groaned. Was it all doomed, then, that Byakko had lost his wits enough to infuse such a pathetic being with such an important task? It was not her fault if she was feeble — , she had no way of knowing that her troubles were about to begin, and that even her life could be forfeit if the Tiger so decreed it. But for the God to have made it so difficult from the outset impressed his shadow not at all. If anything, he realised darkly, it would simply increase his own burden if he was to ensure the child lived long enough to be of any use.

"Just a kid, huh." He murmured softly, as he closed his eyes, flooding his thoughts with images of other children similarly cursed with an unavoidable fate. "Well, Byakko. I'll do my best. Heaven only knows if it's enough… but I won't renege. I'll keep my side of the bargain. And if that includes playing nursemaid to a teenage brat, so be it."

As if she had heard him, at that moment, the child glanced up, and her watcher smiled, slowly shaking his head.

"No, you can't see me. And you won't, if I have anything to do with it." He reflected. "None of you will. I'm only a shadow, . And considering everything, it's all I should be."

He couldn't linger in the village now, though, he knew that. Though he had instinctively come here, following the flickering chi of

the young girl, he knew that his attentions were being drawn in a different direction. And, despite his initial scepticism, he realised that , north of the border, another prophesy was in the process of coming true.

"There will come a time when we fight again. Cursed or not, we will. Suzuno won't come here again, but one day, that spirit will return to Sairou. To finish things, once and for all. And, probably, to break the curse."

The words tiptoed across his senses, spoken in the soft, familiar tones of one who, a lifetime earlier, had been someone he had known almost as well as he had known himself, and a rueful smile touched his lips once more.

"Even if you're not here to see them, Jiene, your prophesies still come true." He murmured out loud. "And I have to see it through to the end. No matter what. This isn't the same battle, but it is the same war. And we're still fighting it, just like you said then. You knew, a century ago, what would come to pass. And now it's beginning, so I mustn't waste time here. , this child is no use to me yet. Makiko's spirit is freed, and there is only one place she will head for that I can see. Which means that, as little as I like the idea, I must first go to Arudo and see the situation there."

He frowned, getting to his feet as he drew on his strength to transfer his body to another place.

"I need to find an ally — a man who stalks the shadows, just as I once did."

Author's Note

I said ages ago that I had extra chapters of this… and I finally found the rest of them. So as promised, I'm uploading them. xD. Who knows, maybe it will get me writing again. Kage is very nearly a complete story, so it would be a shame not to share at least that much with people, ne?

Chapter 8

Chapter Seven

The Palace Archives were as dank and as crowded as she remembered.

As she made her way through the rows of shelves, interspersed as they were with desks clustered around by hard-working, pinched-faced scribes and students, Makiko fought the urge to screw up her face in disdain. This was a boring place, with an atmosphere made heavy and insufferable by the obsessive desire to learn. All around her she could sense their diligence as, everywhere she looked, young men studied exhaustively for the difficult political examinations.

It was almost that time of year again, then, she reflected absently. The time when the court would once more be filled with ignorant youths all vying for power and position in the Imperial gaze. But, as well she knew, knowledge and learning was not enough.

There was more than one way to skin a cat.

As her gaze rested on the carved emblem of Byakko that adorned the far wall, a wry smile touched her lips. Well, skinning a cat might just be an apt analogy , she reasoned. , her main objective was the ultimate destruction of Byakko — both his chosen and his subjects as she forced them to kneel before her in defeat.

“Sashi-hime!”

As this tantalising thought brushed across her thoughts, someone called her from across the hall and she forced her attention back to the present, remembering just in time that — at least for now — Sashi was the name of the shell she had chosen to inhabit. She forced a smile across the Ueke girl’s pretty features, suppressing the faint flicker of the Princess’s own spirit as she turned to meet the speaker’s gaze with a warm one of her own. As she met his emerald eyes, however, the smile almost froze on her face as ice and anger pierced through her.

This man was Han-ke. He looked it, smelt it… reeked of it in every regard. He was one of *that* family… and she would know not to take them lightly again. They were, , the Royal family’s Imperial hounds, their every move at a Prince or King’s beck and call. Though on the surface they appeared both benevolent and even-handed, there was a

cold edge to their smiles of welcome, and behind the guise of their astrological calling lurked the skills and arts of the most ruthless of assassins.

Frantically she dug through Sashi's memories for a name. Though the man who stood before her might be any one of the large and powerful family's many branch members, somehow she sensed that he was not. That of all of the Han, this one was *the* one. The one who had sold his heart and soul to master those dark arts with resolute, fanatical fervour and who, given the right provocation, would plunge through darkness and death to uphold the will and wishes of his King.

In that respect, Makiko knew that she ought to respect him — that their similar tastes for swift and silent punishment should give them things in common. Yet more than any other Sairou clan she loathed the Han — and imprinted on her memories still were the images of her killer's impassive face, as he had sent her earthly body gasping its last breath. She had tried to corrupt the Emperor's sharpest weapon, and she had failed. Yet now, a century on, perhaps at long last she would have a chance to redress that balance.

"Rouhei." At last she found what she was seeking, bowing her head slightly in acknowledgement of his presence. "I'm sorry, I was miles away. Is there something I can do for you? Perhaps you need to speak to my husband?"

"To Nefuru-sama?" Rouhei seemed surprised, then he shook his head. "No. I was just surprised to see you in a place like this, that's all. I thought you disliked the archive — that it was dark and dusty and full of dead memories — or am I mistaken?"

Makiko laughed, hating the innocent peal of Sashi's pretty laughter as she widened her smile.

"I may have said that." She admitted sheepishly. "But that doesn't mean that even I never have a need to come here. I would have thought you'd understand that more than most, Rouhei — being that you're so deep in my husband's trust."

Rouhei frowned, and Makiko realised that her initial impressions of his position had been correct. Slowly he nodded his head.

"I see." He said softly. "Then the Prince has spoken to you somewhat, has he? I shouldn't be surprised. And that interest has brought you here, to the Archive? It must have been some discussion indeed."

"I don't really know what I'm looking for." Makiko admitted. "But I

don't think here is a good place to discuss anything. It's sensitive information, ."

She smiled again.

"But I think I'm lucky to have run into you." She added brightly. "If anyone knows their way around the Archives, it's Han Rouhei-sama."

"I think you're praising me too much, Sashi-hime." Rouhei's expression broke into a wry smile. "But you're right. This is not a matter that should be discussed casually in an open space like this. Even though I'm sure everyone here has their own things on their mind — I'd rather we continued it somewhere more discreet."

He turned, gesturing to the hallway beyond.

"My room is not occupied at the moment, and it's as vaguely tidy as it ever will be." He added. "It may not be the most welcoming place for the consort of Nefuru-sama, but if you'll forgive me this once, Hime-sama, it would be a more secure place to talk about whatever's on your mind."

"You should know by now that I'm not one to stand on ceremony." Makiko scolded. "Lead the way, Rouhei. I'm right behind you."

Rouhei's eyes twinkled with amusement, and he bowed his head, turning on his heel and leading the way towards the cluster of chambers that marked his own study quarters. It was not really simply an office, Makiko realised, but a small annexe, with many other chambers leading off the main one. As they stepped inside, she paused, glancing around her at the disarray of papers, bound tomes and hastily sketched diagrams strewn over all the available surfaces. Against the far wall was the huge star chart, worn at the edges, from which Rouhei calculated many of his stellar predictions, and in one corner was a globe, criss-crossed with lines and dots that signified each constellation in its journey across the sky. As she looked closer, she could tell that many of the stray papers were filled with Rouhei's scrawling handwriting, as calculation after calculation were scribbled in every available space. He had been working on this for some time, she realised with a jolt. From her eavesdropping and her plunder of Sashi's memories, she knew the Prince and his wife had only become aware of the changes in the past few days. Yet Rouhei's industry indicated a studied project stretching across maybe five or six years.

She frowned, berating herself inwardly. Again she was in danger of underestimating the Han-ke's fanaticism when it came to carrying out their duty. She had truly been away too long, .

At her expression, Rouhei looked sheepish, bowing his head in apology.

“I’m not given to tidy ways, Hime.” He said sheepishly, lifting a bundle of scrolls from one of the seats and dumping it down behind his desk. “But please, try and make yourself comfortable.”

“You really weren’t kidding.” Makiko murmured, sinking down into the available seat and spreading her skirts more tidily across her knees. “To think that a member of the Han-ke could work in such chaos…”

“Well, now you know why my brother despairs of me so much.” Rouhei laughed. “Though I think this is the first time I’ve entertained a Princess in my work quarters, so I’m not used to such high status visitors. My work has a habit of taking precedence over all other things — which I’m sure you agree is a definite Han-ke trait, whatever my other flaws.”

“Yes. So I’ve come to understand.” Makiko pursed her lips slightly, remembering again her last encounter with the Han-ke. Then she nodded. “But it’s all right. I didn’t come here to discuss your organisational skills, Rouhei. My husband trusts you as much as he trusts himself, so I don’t feel that I’m betraying anyone by coming to you. The truth is that Nefuru spoke to me of your conversation with him the other day. Before Ouba left for the East, in fact… about the possibility of Byakko’s legend and Sairou being under threat.”

“I thought that might be it.” Rouhei admitted. “You have a certain seriousness in your gaze that I don’t often see, Sashi-hime. I thought that that might be what was troubling you.”

“A seriousness?” Makiko gazed at him in surprise. “Really? I hadn’t realised.”

“Well, my spiritual skills may pale in comparison to yours, but my observational ones are first class.” Rouhei winked at her. “Which is why your husband finds me such a useful tool.”

He leant up against the wall, folding his arms absently across his chest.

“So it’s bothering you too, is it, Hime-sama? This idea that Byakko’s legend may be entering its second cycle?”

“Yes.” Makiko said frankly. “That’s a silly question — of course it is. Nefuru even said you knew of people with Byakko’s mark — that they were already among us. Do you really think that Sairou is due to collapse? You’re a cryptic person sometimes and you keep your cards

close to your chest. But when it's something like this — this is my family's future we're talking about. My son's future, Rouhei. You can't keep these things a secret. If you know something, then please, enlighten me!"

"I don't know as much as you think I do." Rouhei shook his head. "I'm an astrologer, Sashi-hime. I read star patterns. I can tell you that yes, in recent weeks and months, there have been definite changes in the Western sky. That the constellations affected are those belonging to Byakko — this is also beyond doubt. I've researched very carefully the structures and constellations and the last time the same pattern came into being was in the period of time before Byakko no Miko entered this world and began to gather her Stellar souls. This is what I reported to Nefuru-sama. This, in effect, is all I know."

"But what about the people with Byakko's mark?" Makiko's eyes narrowed. "What of them?"

"I have not seen any for myself." Rouhei said evenly. "I cannot confirm their existence for certain — I can only say that I've heard rumours to that effect. That I expect them to come, I can't deny. But whether or not they are already in situe — that remains to be seen."

He shrugged his shoulders.

", no matter how good I am at plotting the future in stars, I am not a psychic and I cannot see these things before they happen. My calculations are just that — numbers and angles and probability. Mathematics. Science, if you like. They're not based on hunches or intuition."

"No, I suppose you're right." Makiko eyed her companion thoughtfully, gauging him as she did so. He was right, she realised with a jolt. He was a Han, sure enough, with the same hair and eyes as the one she had cursed to death so many years before. But though he was sworn in bond to his Prince, he was not like that Han. Whilst that man had possessed spiritual senses to rival her own, and a quick, ruthless ability to use his skills to evade danger, Rouhei's aura did not even prickle with the faintest of spectral energy. He was an ordinary man who had gained his position through cleverness and hard work, not through his ability to manipulate magic. Despite herself, a smile touched Makiko's lips.

If she wanted to kill him, it would be easy. He would be halfway to the afterlife he could neither sense nor see before he even realised something was trying to harm him. Somehow this thought gave her confidence. Like the Royal House of Sairou, Han Rouhei was

spiritually dead. And with Sashi in her power, she could move freely without fear of detection as she sought to uncover the progress of her enemy God.

“I came to the Archives because I wanted to find out more about the last time.” She said now, meeting Rouhei’s gaze with earnest ebony eyes. “No one lives now who remembers Byakko no Miko’s coming or the people she gathered to save this land. And most of the written history is sealed away in places that people can’t easily find it. But if we are… if there is to be danger here again, wouldn’t we be safest if we looked at the past and learnt from it? Perhaps there’s a connection.”

“I’ve thought the same.” Rouhei admitted. “But Hime-sama, you have to realise that addressing that kind of idea to either your Lord Husband or the Emperor himself carries risks. It’s the main reason why I haven’t attempted to acquire access to that part of the Royal Archive. I’ve been studying this possibility for a long time — in fact, ever since I noticed that the stars of Amefuri’s constellation had shifted their position slightly in the Western sky. But even though I know the key to that past is in the secure area, I’ve held back from investigating it further. Instead I’ve focused on other things — on training Kinka in her duty to protect Ouba-hime from harm, and in supporting the Prince and the Emperor as much as one man can. Eventually it will probably come to it — I don’t think we can avoid the truth of the matter forever. But as yet, I’ve not broached the subject.”

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

“Well, even though you’re Ueke and from the Northern Province, you must understand what I mean.” He reflected. “Since you’ve married Nefuru-sama, I’m sure you’ve learnt things about the family that perhaps even I don’t know. Either way, the last coming of Byakko had an impact on this court and on the Royal House more than any other. It’s not a legend that either Heiboutei-heika or Nefuru-sama want to be in common conversation around the court. And honestly, I can’t blame them for feeling that way.”

He sighed.

“It’s not a pretty story.” He added. “No matter how you look at it.”

“The story… about Makiko… sama?” Makiko asked softly, and Rouhei nodded.

“Yes.” He agreed evenly. “And even mentioning her name could bring us into danger. The Queen from the East who brought heresy

and almost all out war and destruction to this land when she married Meishitei-sama and took control of this land. Discussing that history is almost a treasonable crime, considering the events in question. , her son was the present Emperor's grandfather. Nefuru-sama is directly descended from her blood. No wonder they don't like to speak of it."

He looked rueful.

"Even as Han-ke, I am careful to watch my tongue." He added. "Within my own household, the events of a hundred years ago are rarely ever brought up. My clan value their connection to the Royal House far too much, I suppose, to be interested in the past. Though it's well known that two of Byakko's people were once born of my blood, their names are seldom mentioned. , to have pride in their involvement with Byakko is also to have pride in the fact one of them slew that Queen in cold blood, right here in the palace. And such a thing is distasteful when you move in high social society."

"Distasteful indeed." Despite herself, Makiko felt her anger clench inside of her as she pieced together the fragmented snippets of that encounter with vivid clarity. "A man who murders a woman in any circumstances is a man without honour, . And I can't see the Han wanting to admit to connections with such an individual."

"You sound just like my brother." Rouhei agreed. "He's of the opinion that having an assassin in the family's history does nothing for public relations when it comes to negotiating political status or when holding judgement over the laity in the Han's territories to the West and South."

"But you think differently?" Makiko eyed him sharply, and slowly Rouhei nodded his head.

"I… rather admire that one." He admitted frankly. "The shadow that taints the Han name. What he did destroyed his life, his position and his reputation, yet he did it anyway. And besides, he *was* once the court's astrologer — just like me. Perhaps because of that I understand a little more what his life was like, and the pressures on him. In the circumstances, it seems clear that he made the only choice he could."

"You think his action was *justified*?" Rage seared through Makiko's heart and for a moment she almost forgot where she was and what her true objective was. Then she sighed, shaking her head.

"I suppose we'll never know for sure, since he's long dead too, now." She added. "Han Daiyu."

"You know his name?" Rouhei looked startled, and inwardly

Makiko berated her slip. She shrugged.

“I’ve heard it mentioned.” She said lightly. “, even if people try to quash rumours from being passed around, there are some which survive regardless. Han Daiyu is the man who’s said to have slain an Empress and covered her chambers in blood. That kind of story is impossible to erase completely. No matter who tries to conceal it — I’m sure there are even people in the streets of Arudo who’ve heard that tale.”

Rouhei stared at her for a moment. Then he laughed, nodding his head.

“Doubtless so.” He admitted. “Though twisted into grotesque inaccuracy, no doubt. Han Daiyu was never found, yet he was arraigned in his absence for the murder of the Queen and I’ve no doubt there are enough lurid tales to fill all Arudo of what may have become of him. I’ve heard some people afraid to speak his name, also, in case somehow he’s become a demon beyond death still lurking in the palace halls waiting to kill another member of the Royal house. But though he’s been vilified for the crime, Makiko’s death was not a tragedy for the West in the long run. The scene may have been a gruesome one, but her death did, , pave the way for Byakko’s summoning.”

He smiled.

“Sairou settled in peace after that, and Byakko’s blessing has allowed us to continue so for a hundred years.” He added. “I suppose we’ll never know whether or not Han Daiyu’s actions killed him or whether he escaped to live as a hermit in oblivion or exile after the raising of the God. I certainly don’t think he became a demon after death since I don’t believe that perpetuating yourself beyond your given life is possible for any man, Seishi or otherwise. But I do believe that, drastic as his actions were, he did it with purpose and conviction. Makiko’s death meant the end of tyranny and oppression. Byakko would never have brought peace to this land otherwise… what Daiyu did had to be done. He was just the only one ruthless enough to do it.”

He cast a glance at the star chart that hung on the wall.

“That chart has belonged to the astrologers of the Han-ke since time immemorial.” He added. “Once, I’m sure, Daiyu plotted his stars on that same grid. Now *I’m* the one who uses it — I always hope that if the time came, I could be as decisive and single minded when it came to the safety of my Prince and the whole of Sairou.”

Makiko was silent for a moment, digesting his words as she fought to keep her anger under wraps. He was just another Han, she reminded herself. He was not her true target, and to kill him would be to create suspicion. She had not yet fully acclimatised to Sashi's body and simple charm magic, either — and she knew that in terms of physical strength Rouhei might yet overpower her, for though he was slightly built, it was a lean rather than a skinny frame. Her lip curled slightly as she acknowledged the physical resemblance between him and the man she hated with all her heart and soul. Yet somehow she controlled her pique, turning to the window as she forced her unsettled temper back into place.

"All of this doesn't tell us why Byakko would come again." She said quietly. "Your ancestor is dead, Rouhei. You won't see him save or slay anyone this time around."

"By now Han Daiyu must be dead, in one way or another." Rouhei agreed. "But if Byakko does return, Amefuri's soul will have been reborn into a new form."

"I thought you just said you didn't believe in such things."

"I don't believe human souls can become demons." Rouhei shook his head. "Reincarnation, yes. I believe in that. It would be silly not to, considering that if Byakko is to be summoned, his Seishi will have to be reborn. But into human forms, Hime. Not as monsters of hell and brimstone waiting to slay us in the shadows. I'm not given to such superstitions. I prefer to work with tangible things — things I can calculate with my own skills."

"You really are convinced, then, that Byakko *is* coming."

"I am." Rouhei acknowledged. "Even if I haven't seen it with my own eyes yet, Sashi-hime — I am sure."

"Would this have something to do with Kinka?" Makiko fixed him with a searching look, and Rouhei gazed at her in surprise.

"Kinka?"

"Nefuru said that she'd seen one of Byakko's marks for herself."

"I see." Rouhei's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "And I thought I'd told her to keep such matters to herself and leave any discussion of it to me."

"Then she *did* see something?" Makiko's heart leapt inside of her chest, and Rouhei shrugged.

"Not having seen what she did, I can't answer that question." He

said vaguely. “And Kinka is not here any more, so it seems a futile channel of enquiry. We’d do better to focus on Sairou, Sashi-hime. Not worry about young girls sent far from this land.”

Makiko eyed him for a moment, and Rouhei shook his head.

“I won’t play a part in spreading gossip.” He said frankly. “If I haven’t seen it with my own eyes, I will not speak about it. That’s all I can say on that matter. I have not seen what Kinka may have seen. So I cannot confirm anything, and it would be foolish of me to try.”

He smiled.

“My job is to keep watching the stars.” He added. “And I will do so. Diligently.”

As the Princess left the study, Rouhei sat back in his chair, absently drumming his fingers on the desk as he considered the conversation. That Sashi should come to him was not a surprise, he reasoned, since Nefuru had always had a habit of confiding his darkest worries in his quick-witted consort. Yet, despite it all, there had been something different in her expression today. The usual Sashi-hime, whose faith in Kitora was strong enough to hold her strong and optimistic through the worst of her troubles had seemed somehow weighed down by cares, and he frowned, pursing his lips as he tried to rationalise it.

Perhaps, at the end of the day, it was the risk to her young son that had clinched it, he reflected absently. The boy was a child yet, , and mothers were given to being overprotective. Still, as they had discussed the demon spirit Makiko and her legacy to Sairou, there had been something odd in the woman’s demeanour. Something which suggested a knowledge and understanding far greater than she had so far led him to believe.

“But then, she is a royal consort, and I am simply a man of court.” He muttered out loud. “One who spends his time with star charts and old books but who can’t ever see beyond the tangible, no matter how he tries. I doubt Sashi-hime has any idea how deep my duties truly run, so she was probably being circumspect about information she feels I might not need to have. Besides, I am still clueless about this in many regards. If Makiko was a human enemy, I would have no doubts about what to do. But this enemy is not human. And in that regard, perhaps, I am helpless.”

He frowned, pursing his lips as he remembered his last conversation with Kinka. He had deceived his own Prince in that regard, he admitted, and yet he knew that for the time being it was best to keep his silence. Kinka understood, , all the things Nefuru did not. More,

unlike both him and his Prince, Kinka had a proven spiritual awareness that had made her a natural student of the Han-ke's many hidden arts. Leaving it in her hands now was the best thing he could do. For the time being, there was nothing else except to continue studying the stars that glittered with an ominous premonition over the Western heavens.

He got to his feet, moving across the chamber towards the aging star-chart, and running his finger pensively between the constellations that made up Byakko's seven. He was not, he mused sadly, the same as Han Daiyu had been. Though perhaps he was as good as his predecessor at reading the stars, he was only an ordinary man of Han blood. He had taken risks and had moved decisively, true. But no matter how hard he tried, he would never be the same as the man who had disappeared in a shroud of mystery a hundred years before.

"Amefuri." He muttered, his fingers pausing alongside the constellation of the same name. "I can understand Sashi-hime's reticence, but even so, I don't think what you did was evil. You did what I would do, too, if faced with the same situation. Perhaps it is time I asked for access to the restricted material, and found all the details I'm missing on the Empress Makiko's time as consort to Meishitei-heika. His death, her death, and the confusion of civil war, heresy and potential Eastern invasion… I have only the most basic grip on these histories, and most of those through the tinted gaze of my Han ancestors. I couldn't give Kinka much information either, before she left, and to try to do so now would be dangerous. Still, if I can help things here…"

Before the thought had passed through his mind completely, there was a sudden rush of air, and he turned, darting instinctively backwards as something swift and sharp came hurtling across the room towards him, embedding itself in the wall alongside the star chart with a dull thud. For a moment he stared at it, briefly taken off guard. Then, as he registered what it was, his brows knitted together and slowly and cautiously he stepped forward, reaching up to touch the arrow gingerly.

It was not a familiar barb, he reflected, as he examined the neatly fledged and polished weapon that had very nearly shed his blood. It was not one of the military archer's, being thinner and more distinctively custom made in its style and pattern. The shaft and fledging were all in white, and Rouhei noted absently that it was almost as if they had been touched by the Tiger himself.

As he peered at it, he realised that it had not been fired to kill him.

On the contrary, held to the wall by the bright silver tip of the barb was a folded scrap of parchment, and Rouhei's eyes widened with surprise as he registered what it was.

"A message?" He murmured, carefully prising the arrow from the wall as he grasped the paper in his hands. "But from whom? What kind of person leaves a message at court by way of an arrow? An inch or more and it would have gone straight through me — if my instincts weren't as sharp as they are, it might still have grazed me. What kind of reckless idiot would choose this method to contact me when there are a million other ways?"

He glanced at the arrow once more, taking in the craftsmanship with a grudging amount of respect. Whoever had constructed it knew what they were doing, yet the head had not detached from the shaft and as he ran his finger over it, Rouhei realised that this had been intentional. The arrow had been purposely designed for sending the message, and from the bluntness of its tip, Rouhei acknowledged that it had been force that had driven it into the wall in the first place. Someone with knowledge had created it, knowing the kind of surface he was firing at, and more, what kind of head to use so as not to cause an injury to the intended recipient. This thought intrigued him more than any other. That someone could know with such familiarity his own private quarters startled him — aside from Nefuru, who had never held a bow in his life, and Kinka, who was now on her way to Kutou, few people had ever come to his study with any regularity.

"But whoever fired this knew where to aim, and that I was here to see it." He said aloud, moving cautiously to the window and glancing outside. There was no one there, however, and Rouhei found he was not surprised.

"Someone who didn't want me to see them, yet wanted to make contact with me anyway." He decided, returning to his desk and unfolding the parchment he had clutched tightly in his hand. "If you're going to that much trouble, I should at least read what you have to say."

He smoothed the crumpled sheet out on the desk, scanning his gaze over the columns of scrawled characters. Instinctively his gaze was drawn to the signature, and at the sight of it, his eyes widened.

"Nishi no Kage." He whispered. "But… surely…"

He sat back, pursing his lips as a brief memory flitted across his senses.

"*There's no doubt about it, that the court assassin known as Nishi no*

Kage was our ancestor, Han Daiyu." His brother's voice echoed through his thoughts. "*But to make that connection in public is to bring shame to our house, Rouhei. You and I know that in a previous time, such duties were the lot of men of our blood. But Byakko's blessing brought peace to Sairou, and the need for such an entity desisted. Han Daiyu was Byakko's chosen, but he was also the court's assassin Nishi no Kage and the man who slew the Empress Makiko. It is as well to refer to him only by this name. We do not need to recognise his association with this clan, especially considering the consequences of his actions*."

But Han Daiyu was dead, Rouhei acknowledged to himself wryly. The man who had borne that title and lived in Arudo's court shadows may or may not have lived on after Byakko's coming — the truth of it was known by no one, not even his own kin. Yet now, after so many years, there was no other solution. If some other ill had not claimed him, old age by now must have done. So whoever had fired the arrow, it had not been the one the Han-ke knew as Nishi no Kage.

He glanced at the parchment again, this time reading the message through slowly as he digested every single word and phrase. The signature aside, it was written in an encrypted script which Rouhei knew only a select few people had ever been taught how to write. In fact, he reflected absently, among those currently living only he, his older brother, Prince Nefuru and the current Emperor had been educated in its style. Yet this was not written in the familiar writing of any of those people. It was in a new hand, curved and strange, and the sight of it sent a flare of sudden excitement racing through his soul.

"*By the seal of the monkey I greet you, Shadow of the Emperor's court*.
[He read]

I am one you can trust, for I once lived the same world you do. By this missive I ask your help. A century ago, a man bearing the same name chose to spill a demon's blood and give his soul to the Tiger's grace. Now he calls to Sairou once more. If you truly wish to uphold the Royal oath on your scarred hand, you must ensure the safety of Byakko's people. You must do this even if it means your death, or the death of those you consider dear. Darkness greater than your own stalks the court once more, and if the Tiger's blood is shed, it is the end of everything. I am simply the messenger. The devil you must find with your own hands, for she is far too cunning to easily show her face.

Nishi no Kage."

"Byakko's call for help." He whispered. "Daiyu is dead, but I said it myself… that Amefuri must have been reincarnated. If that's so, maybe… this message… somehow is his call to me from beyond that

grave. And if that's true, if it is… Maybe they've been watching for a while. , since I put so much time into training Kinka — since I've done so much so far to protect one of Byakko's from harm or persecution — perhaps now the Tiger sees me as an ally and so is seeking me out."

He frowned, re-folding the parchment and slipping into the sash of his belt.

It was time , he decided resolutely. Time he went to the restricted area of the Archive and found out once and for all all of the details surrounding Makiko's death.

And most importantly of all, the story of the coming of Byakko.

Chapter 9

Chapter Eight
:::Flashback:::
Kaidou, a century earlier

"This inn looks safe enough."

Tatara paused, glancing up at the gaudily painted front facing, and at his side Toroki nodded her head.

"I think so too." She agreed. "Taiitsukun sent us right here, to Kaidou, just like we hoped — but the effect of that level of magic when you're not used to it is somewhat draining. The best thing we should do is find somewhere to rest, eat and take a chance to absorb information. We're not exactly locals to this area, ."

"*Some of us less than others." Suzuno reflected with a sigh. "I'm glad you think we should stop, Toroki. I thought I was just being wimpish — but I still feel a little dizzy from that transfer."*

"*Dizzy?" Tokaki shot her a startled look. "Really? I feel fine."*

"*You're more used to the concept of instant transfer, though, don't forget." Tatara reminded him with a wry smile. "It's a built in part of who you are."*

"*I suppose so." Tokaki pursed his lips. "Does it make you dizzy when I do it, Suzuno-chan?"*

"*The first time, it did." Suzuno looked surprised. "I guess that I haven't really thought about it, otherwise. Perhaps not. But this was a much longer distance, right? We've come all the way from Toroki's mountain to the West Coast — isn't that a really long way?"*

"*I'd hardly call it my mountain, Suzuno." Toroki looked amused. "But yes. It's a good few days trek through rough terrain if we had done it by foot. Dizzy or not, Taiitsukun's done us a favour."*

"*Are you sure it was better to come here than go to Arudo, though?" Tokaki cast her a sidelong glance. "I'm not meaning to doubt your sight-seeing abilities, Toroki, but Taiitsukun seemed pretty sure, and…"*

"*I think you mean precognition, Tokaki-kun." Toroki shook her head, though there was a faint clouding in her emerald eyes. "Sight-seeing is something none of us have any time for, even if it is a first time visit to*

Kaidou."

"I have been here before, but it's been many years." Tatara observed, as Tokaki's expression became sheepish. "I was just a boy, then — but the memories are not unpleasant ones."

"And that's why you know this inn?" Suzuno questioned. Tatara shook his head.

"I don't know any inns at all." He admitted. "But this area doesn't seem dangerous — I think we'd be safe enough to stop here."

This place has a good feel, too. "Toroki agreed" I don't think Arudo would have been any better a choice, Tokaki. This feels right — as though it's somewhere we're meant to be. I think we should stay the night here."

She smiled.

"We're near the sea, and there's a nice breeze." She added. "And it's an added bonus as far as I'm concerned that we're also a fair way from the capital. That's not somewhere we should be considering at the moment — it's a dangerous place and none of us are ready to take that risk. Suzuno least of all — I'm not going to risk anyone getting hurt if there's no need for it to happen."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"And on the bright side, I don't think that anyone will be hunting us down here when so many people are coming in and out of the country into this port." She concluded. "We should be able to accomplish our goal without too much complication."

"Do you think they'll have rooms, then?" Suzuno looked doubtful. "It seems quite a busy place, and you said it was a port, right? There must be a lot of traders around."

"Probably, but we'll just have to try our luck." Tokaki said reflectively. "We can but ask."

He slipped between Suzuno and Toroki, sending each a teasing smile.

"Either of you want to share a room with me?" He asked playfully, and Toroki sighed, shaking her head.

"Tokaki, do you ever give up?" She demanded, and Tokaki shrugged.

"Nope." He said cheerfully. "It's a sign that a man is alive, , if he can pursue a beautiful woman."

"I thought I was off limits." Suzuno reminded him, and Tokaki spread his hands.

"No harm in a little flirting, and you know that it's all in fun." He responded unrepentantly. "Well? Are we going inside?"

"It looks like you and I will be sharing a room, Tokaki, and leaving the girls to themselves." Tatara observed calmly, amusement flickering in his amethyst eyes. "I'm sure I won't be quite as interesting a roommate as either of them, but I'll do my best not to snore."

"Just keep your seeds to yourself and we'll be fine." Tokaki advised, pushing open the door of the tavern as he did so. "All right, people. We're going in."

He stepped into the foyer, leading the way boldly up to the bar as his companions exchanged looks, nonetheless following him as he raised his hand to attract the attention of the man on duty.

"Hey, we want to hire a couple of rooms." He said easily. "Any going? Or are we out of luck?"

"A couple of rooms?" The man eyed him for a moment, then, "For how many? We're very busy this week."

"Just the four of us." Tatara said pleasantly. "Two rooms will suffice, if you have them, sir. We're looking for a place that can give us a good meal and a secure place to sleep for the night. Can you oblige?"

At Tatara's more measured, polite enquiry, the man paused, then offered him a smile, bowing his head slightly to acknowledge the request.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, you're in luck. We do have two such rooms available since this morning." He agreed. "Have you travelled far?"

"All over Sairou, it feels like." Suzuno sighed. "You really have rooms? Oh, good! I was worried we'd have to find a tree to sleep under, and trees aren't as common in Sairou as they should be."

"Then we'll take them." Tatara told the innkeeper, slipping his hand into the folds of his clothing and producing a cloth purse which he set down on the unit, pulling the string to open it as he began to count out coins. "Will it be all right to pay half now, and half when we leave? We may want to be here more than one night, depending on things."

"Yes, sir. Quite all right." The innkeeper nodded his head. "Just let me know the name and I'll make sure they're kept free for that purpose."

"Thank you." Tatara flashed him a smile. "And it's Tsuonie. Tsuonie Kasaru."

"Tsuonie?" The innkeeper's round face underwent a transformation as he did a double-take, staring at the young man in surprise. "I… I'm sorry,

sir. I didn't… I didn't realise… our best rooms are currently rented out, and… though this is the best inn in the city, so it's said, I… with traders…"

"It's quite all right." Tatara dismissed his concern with a flick of his hand. "Really, we're not looking for anything out of the ordinary, especially not at such short notice."

He smiled, touching the fabric of his clothing.

"I'm a man of Byakko these days." He added. "I prefer a simple life."

"Yes, sir." The innkeeper looked relieved, bowing his head again. "Then if you'll wait one moment, I'll have someone show you your rooms."

He disappeared into the back, and Tokaki raised an eyebrow, casting his friend an amused look.

"The name Tsuonie carries far." He reflected. "You hide your noble roots under a bushel, but when you want to pull them out, you can."

"A place like this is not an ordinary city alehouse." Tatara admitted, a faint look of sheepishness crossing his handsome features. "But to be honest I didn't expect quite that reaction. My family are no longer active at court, on account of my parents' dying — and I've never tried to become involved in those things. My sister's name is no longer Tsuonie, but Han… I didn't realise that the name Tsuonie was still carried with such respect in these parts."

"But this is traditionally Tsuonie land." Toroki said quietly. "Isn't it? This area all once fell under the jurisdiction of the Tsuonie family, before they were struck down by famine."

"Yes." Tatara admitted. "That is true. My father's lands were in this part of Sairou… I suppose I had forgotten that."

"He'd forgotten that." Tokaki slapped a hand to his brow in disbelief. "Kasaru-kun, sometimes I wonder if you come from the same planet as the rest of us. You say the most bizarre things sometimes… did you know that?"

"Don't pick on him." Suzuno instructed. "Tatara-san's family aren't here any more, . It's not his fault if he doesn't remember."

She cast him a smile.

"But I guess that it makes sense that you were here as a child, if this is where your family had property, right?"

"Yes. But the land now belongs to the Han-ke, so I no longer have a reason to come here like I did then." Tatara reflected. "Through my sister's marriage it became a chattel of the Han's growing power-base. Her

husband claimed it all, and I was a child foisted on a monastery, so I had no right to any of it. The religious life forbids it, and I have every belief Keri-neesama expected me to take that up wholesale once she saw the mark on my hand glow with such a vivid light."

"You mean they stole it from you?" Suzuno's eyes widened in horror, and Tatara laughed, shaking his head.

"Not at all." He assured her. "I never wanted it in the first place. I'm happy so long as I have my plants and that the people who surround me are good people with clear motives and open hearts. I don't care about riches or political power. My sister's husband is a smart man and more than capable of handling those things. So I don't mind at all."

"You're more reasonable a person than I would be, in that situation." Toroki remarked, and Tatara shrugged.

"There's no reason to get upset about things you can't change." He said philosophically. "And besides, my duty was to wait for Byakko no Miko. Being Suzuno-sama's comrade and protector has always been my destiny. Nothing else really mattered."

At that moment the door swung back to reveal the innkeeper once more, a young woman in tow. Tokaki, who had opened his mouth to make a comment stopped, his eyes widening as he took in the innkeeper's companion, and Suzuno cringed inwardly, realising all too quickly what was going through her companion's mind.

The stranger was extremely pretty, with the gentle complexion that seemed common along the Sairou sea-front. Thick mist-like hair flowed in elegant waves over her shoulders, caught up in two looped twists over the top of her head and tied in place with bows of thick pink ribbon. It was a style Suzuno had seen among many of Kaidou's young townswomen as they had passed through the city, yet somehow the unconscious grace in this newcomer's bearing and appearance gave her a unique, somewhat elegant beauty that surpassed any of the other girls Tokaki had tried his luck with since they had been dropped unceremoniously outside Kaidou's massive city gates. Her eyes, as vivid a blue-green as the sea that lapped up against the Kaidou pier were lit up with life and a spirit that told of an inner strength and mischief, and as she surveyed each of them in turn, she seemed to be enjoying some inner joke with herself even as she bowed her head towards them.

"Welcome to the Ryohi Inn." She said softly, her tones edged with a soft Western accent, and as she raised her gaze, she met Tokaki's stare full on, twitching her lips into a faint, playful smile. Much to Suzuno's surprise, Tokaki did not make any attempt to respond, seemingly struck speechless

by her presence, and as the silence threatened to grow longer, Tatara stepped forward, casting his friend a confused glance as he did so.

"Thank you." He said evenly. "We'd be most grateful if you'd show us our rooms."

"With pleasure." The girl's smile widened, and she nodded her head. "My name is Dourin… please, in any way I can be of service, let me know."

Suzuno eyed Tokaki for a moment, waiting again for him to say something, but no flirtatious remark passed his lips, and she sighed, elbowing him discreetly in the ribs as Dourin turned on her heel, gesturing for them to follow her towards a steep and winding staircase at the back of the building. There was a certain bounce to her step, and it was with some difficulty that Tokaki dragged his gaze away.

"Mm? Something wrong, Suzuno-chan?"

"Are you all right? You've gone all quiet and it isn't like you."

"Quiet?" Tokaki's gaze strayed back towards the retreating rear figure of Dourin as she made her way daintily up the stairs. "I don't know what you mean."

"I think the word you're looking for is star-struck." Toroki's wry tones came from behind and Suzuno glanced around, seeing the laughter in the prophet's green eyes. "Literally in fact, this time. That girl is one of us, Suzuno-chan. Do you feel it? She has Byakko in her aura — I'm pretty sure that she's the one we came here to Kaidou to find."

"She is?" Tokaki's eyes lit up at this, and Suzuno sighed, rolling her eyes in resignation as she took him firmly by the arm.

"Come on, else she and Tatara will get way ahead of us, and we won't know where we're staying." She said firmly. "You might not care about food or bed, but I definitely do."

"Bed, huh…" Tokaki murmured absently, and Toroki shook her head.

"He's lost." She said pragmatically. "I'd give up trying, Suzuno-chan. He'll have to snap out of it on his own… poor Tatara will have to deal with him."

"I guess so." Suzuno agreed. "Oh, they've stopped up ahead! I guess this is it."

"Your rooms are these two, on this floor." Dourin cast Suzuno a smile, evidently having heard the end of her sentence. She slipped a key in the lock of the nearest, unfastening it and then handing the key to Tatara

before repeating the action with the second. This time she handed the key to Toroki, who took it with a warm murmur of thanks.

"I trust that you won't have any problems during your stay." Dourin continued. "But if you do, please, feel free to call on me and I'll do my best to assist you. It will be my pleasure."

She bowed again, and Suzuno was once more aware of the unconscious grace in the girl's bearing and movement. At first glance, and in a different setting and outfit, Dourin could easily have been mistaken for a noble lady, she decided. Yet, despite her ample bosom and perfectly proportioned figure, Suzuno did not get the impression that this girl was in the habit of selling herself in order to earn a living. Rather she seemed like someone who attracted attention yet kept it easily at arm's length, and Suzuno realised ruefully that perhaps this time Tokaki had properly met his match. Dourin was no older than her late teens, yet there was something about the girl that told of a young woman who was fully self-sufficient and satisfied with her lot, and Suzuno found herself faintly envious of the confidence with which this stranger carried herself.

"But if Toroki's right… if she really is one of Byakko's chosen… then we will have to speak to her." She realised. "Oh, but right now I just want to rest. We can do all that later, surely."

"Thank you very much, Dourin-san." Tatara was speaking now. "We'll be sure to do so."

Dourin dimpled once more, pausing to meet Tokaki's gaze with a questioning, even teasing one of her own. Then, as gracefully as she had come she was gone, leaving the four travellers to themselves.

"Well, that was more painless than it could have been." Toroki was the first to break the silence, casting Suzuno a smile. "Well, Suzuno-chan? You said you were tired. What do you want to do? Settle and take a nap? Or are we going to pursue Byakko's business straight away?"

"Byakko's business?" Tatara looked startled, and Toroki nodded.

"That Dourin girl." She agreed. "I'm almost certain it's her we've come here to see. That she's the fourth Seishi we've been seeking — the one born under the sign of Subaru."

Tatara let out a low whistle.

"And it's that easy?" He asked. "We've literally fallen right across her path — could we have been more fortunate?"

"Maybe it's not luck. Maybe it's destiny." Tokaki suggested, and Toroki sighed, grabbing him by the shoulders and giving him a little shake.

"You, stop thinking dirty thoughts and snap out of it." She ordered sternly. "Just because this Dourin is a particularly attractive woman doesn't mean you can go chasing after her. Understood? This is about Byakko, not your libido. So get it in check. A little flirting is one thing, but you're no use to anyone if you space out and flat out gawp at a complete stranger just because she happens to be well endowed."

"No kidding." Tokaki muttered, and Toroki raised an eyebrow.

"Tokaki!"

"All right, I get it." Tokaki grimaced. "Stop nagging me. If she's one of Sairou's protective spirits then of course I'd be drawn to her. Right? And it wouldn't hurt, either, if I talked to her some while we were here. Right?"

"If you can manage to get a word out when she's around." Suzuno murmured, and Tokaki sent her a startled look.

"You're ganging up on me too?" He demanded, and Suzuno shook her head.

"No, but it's a bit pathetic that you just stood and stared at her." She replied. "She's not going to want to come with us if she thinks one of the party is a pervert who just likes to stare at women's chests."

"Hey, I wasn't just staring at her chest!" Tokaki protested hotly, and Toroki snorted.

"No… as she went up the stairs you were definitely fixating on a different part of her anatomy." She reflected. "Suzuno's right, Tokaki. Get it together, all right? This isn't about picking up a pretty girl. It's about saving Sairou from heresy and destruction. Remember?"

"Okay, already, I got it!" Tokaki sounded wounded. "You really need to lighten up some, Toroki… you're sounding like an old woman!"

"Judging by the current level of conversation, I suggest we take a chance to rest before we do anything else." Tatara said wisely, before the squabble could escalate into a full scale dispute. "We can worry about Subaru when we've done so — and after we've eaten, too. We have come a long way, — it won't hurt to be fully alert and rested before we think about how to approach Dourin-san. , we don't know if she's aware of her stellar self or not, yet. And we don't want to frighten her."

"She didn't seem like someone who would be easily frightened." Suzuno reflected, and Toroki shook her head.

"I had that feeling, too." She agreed. "But Tatara's right. For now, we should take advantage of the rooms we've booked and rest. We'll tackle Subaru on the morrow — and hope she'll be receptive to what we have to

say!"

She reached out her hand to Suzuno, who grasped it with a grin.

"I hope so." She responded. "It sounds simple that way — and the more of us there are, the better it will be when we have to go to Arudo."

"Well, this room will do for Tokaki and I." Tatara said, resting his hand on one of the doors. "They're quite basic, but the other has a little less chill from the night wind, by the looks of its position. I'd rather our Miko wasn't at risk of catching cold from the night sea breeze, so I think that'd be the best way. Tokaki, you don't mind, do you?"

"I'm not afraid of a little sea wind." Tokaki shook his head. "So it's decided. We'll rest up and later we'll meet up for food and, hopefully, Subaru. Right?"

"Agreed." Toroki nodded, and Suzuno followed suit. "Come on, Suzuno-chan. This is ours. Since Tatara's been such a gentleman, we shouldn't ignore his kindness!"

With that she pushed open the door of the chamber, leading the Priestess inside and pushing the door shut with a sigh.

Suzuno sank down onto the nearest bed, reaching up to loosen the ribbons that held her long plaits in place.

"It's good not to be moving for a while." She murmured. "Whatever magic Taiitsukun used to bring us here is still making my head spin a little bit."

"It's impressive magic." Toroki admitted, sitting down on the bed opposite and kicking off her heavy boots. "But we owe Taiitsukun a favour for doing it. It would have taken several days to get here on foot, . Kaidou is a long way from the Kanin mountains."

"I suppose so." Suzuno nodded. "And we might already have found Subaru, so so much the better."

"Suzuno…" Toroki faltered, and Suzuno stopped in the unwinding of her braid, casting her companion a questioning look.

"Yes? Is something wrong? You look troubled all of a sudden."

"Not wrong, exactly." Toroki dropped back against the rough fabric of the pillow, letting out her breath in a rush. "I just wanted to thank you for taking my side and backing me up when we were on Taikyoku-zan. I've no doubt Taiitsukun knows exactly why I don't want to go to Arudo, and I didn't know what might be said or not said. But that you took my part… it meant a lot. Especially since, essentially, we've only just met. And though I

know I can trust you with my life… I don't know that you feel the same about me yet. You must have a lot of doubts about a smuggler who had you kidnapped in the tunnels of a mining mountain, even now."

"Doubts?" Suzuno looked pensive, loosing her grip on her hair as she eyed the older woman thoughtfully. "You know, I'm not sure that I do. I didn't like being grabbed like I was. But you trusted me a lot right away too, Toroki-san. You told me about your family and your real name, even though you haven't told Tokaki or Tatara any of that stuff. And I know you don't want to go to Arudo yet because other members of your kin are there — right? And you're worried about what you saw."

She sighed, leaning back against the cool stone of the wall.

"Honestly, I'm worried about it too." She admitted. "That someone's going to attack Tokaki and that the person who is… might be one of Byakko's people. Which means… that no matter what, I can't give up on talking to them. Can I? That even if they hurt Tokaki — or me — I still have to face them and try to make them an ally. That scares me a bit, too. So it wasn't just about backing you up. I think you were right. We're not ready to do that yet."

"Definitely not." Toroki sighed. "Well, so long as we're of the same mind, that's the most important thing. It will come, sooner or later. As you say, there's no avoiding it. What I saw will come true. But the form it will take is still vague, and I'm hoping that by coming here I'll gain some clarity. There must be other things that I've seen wisps and hints of that might bring the Arudo vision into clearer focus. At least, that's my gamble."

"Did Taiitsukun's words worry you?" Suzuno asked curiously, and Toroki nodded.

"Some." She acknowledged. "I know as well that I'm taking a risk. But right now, it was the only thing I could do."

"Toroki-san… will you tell me about him?" Suzuno murmured. "The one who's in Arudo — the one who's going to fight us?"

A flash of pain touched Toroki's pretty features, and she shook her head.

"It's not something I'm happy talking about, not yet." She murmured. "I feel that… there was betrayal involved. On me, on my kin, on the faith that binds us together. No, Suzuno. Please don't ask me to divulge that yet. I've told you as much as I can bear to… please give me some time to come to terms with the rest before I say any more."

"All right." Suzuno's expression softened in understanding, and she smiled. "I trust you. And you have told me a lot, so whenever you're ready,

it's fine. Subaru's our focus for now, . She doesn't seem particularly scary, even if she does have Tokaki tongue-tied."

She giggled.

"I've not seen Tokaki look like that before." She added. "It was quite funny, really. He's such a smart alec most of the time."

"He does like women rather a lot, and he is slick with his tongue." Toroki acknowledged, a faint smile touching her own features at this. "But I wonder if this time he's met his match. It will be interesting, without a doubt. I'm quite looking forward to properly talking to this Dourin girl. If she can keep Tokaki's cocky streak in check, so much the better."

"I think he really liked her, you know."

"Maybe." Toroki shrugged. "But he's also the kind of guy who likes what he sees quite a lot, so whether it's any deeper than her physical attributes has yet to be proven. She is a comely individual, and well endowed. And he's red-blooded enough to notice it… so we'll see."

"Tatara-san didn't react the same way, though." Suzuno reflected. "He and Tokaki are totally different, aren't they? Even though I've only known them a short time, it seems weird to me how good friends they are. They couldn't be more opposite in a lot of ways."

"That's true enough." Toroki agreed. "But I suppose that's the nature of the beast — Byakko's people come from all walks of life, . Maybe it's the God that's bound them together like this. Who knows?"

"Byakko is pretty powerful, isn't he?" Suzuno mused, and Toroki nodded.

"Very." She agreed.

"Then why is it he needs us so much? Why can't he come here himself and save Sairou? Why does he need a Miko and Seishi?"

"Even I don't know the answer to that, though Taiitsukun probably could tell you." Toroki's gaze flitted up towards the uneven lie of the ceiling beams. "I imagine it has something to do with that immense level of power, however. If it was constantly here, in this world, it would distort things. It would clash with other powers and become overwhelming. The God leaves an element of his protective power behind after the summoning in the form of a treasure — a Shinzahou, I think it's called. Genbu no Miko left one, and you will probably do the same, when we finally succeed in our task. But that's the most he or any God can do. We can only ask his help. We can't expect him to be constantly at our level. If he was, who knows what might occur?"

“I suppose so.” Suzuno pursed her lips. “Like using a whole river to put out one flame, something like that?”

“Yes, in a manner of speaking.” Toroki turned to meet the Priestess’s gaze. “You know, I’m really glad that you’re quick-witted, Suzuno. I don’t think I could bear it if you had been slow to grasp all these things being flung your way.”

“I try my best.” Suzuno flushed red at this. “In school I always get good marks. And my Father is an expert, you know, in his historical field. He’s got his doctorate and everything. I come from a smart family, so it’d be odd if I wasn’t smart myself. He always says that.”

“Do you miss him?”

“Yes.” Suzuno sighed, nodding her head. “I miss my world a lot. Especially at night. But I’m trying to be brave, Toroki. So lets not talk about that either, okay? You have things you don’t want to talk about yet. And so do I. Okay?”

“I suppose that’s fair.” Toroki agreed. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

She frowned.

“Suzuno, tell me something.” She murmured, and Suzuno nodded.

“All right, if I can.” She replied. “What is it?”

“What kind of bond do you have with Tokaki and Tatara?”

“What kind of…?” Suzuno’s brows knitted together. “They’re friends. Allies. People I trust. Tokaki saved my life, , when I first came here. And I feel like… well, we’re a team. You too, now. Even though it’s only been a short time. Why?”

“Teammates, huh.” Toroki ruminated on this for a moment, then, “Promise me you’ll keep it that way until the moment that you leave this world.”

“Pardon me?” Suzuno stared. “Why wouldn’t I? What do you think is going to happen to make me change my mind? I trust them — I don’t think I’ll doubt either of them so easily.”

“No, I don’t mean that.” Toroki shook her head. “It’s just… what I said in the cavern beneath the mountain I meant with all my heart. If you mix your duty with other things, someone will get hurt. The Miko and her Seishi are teammates, just as you said. Allies in a particular cause. But if that line is crossed and it becomes something more…”

“Toroki, I don’t have any intention of falling in love. I told you that already.”

“I know you did. But I don’t believe you mean it as deeply as you think you do.”

“You think I’m lying to you?” Despite herself, Suzuno was indignant, and Toroki held up her hands, shaking her head.

“No. I don’t think you’re a liar.” She responded. “But I don’t think even you realise what’s beginning. And even if I warn you, I’m sure that I’m not going to prevent it from happening. Still, even so, I have to say it. Suzuno, for the sake of Sairou and for the sake of your sanity and ours, you must not let that line be crossed. Aside from needing to be chaste for Byakko’s ceremony, you have no idea the kind of chaos that could erupt if you allow your comrades to feel more for you than simply loyalty and platonic affection.”

“Tokaki’s told me that several times already— that I’m off limits.” Suzuno put her hands on her hips. “And I’ve been brought up better than to just let any man do those kind of things to me when I’m not even out of school, let alone married or anything like that. I don’t know what you’re worried about, but I’m not a cheap person. I value myself more than that.”

“Good.” Toroki sighed. “I’m making you angry, now, and I don’t mean to do that. I’m sorry, Suzuno. It’s not your honour I doubt. It’s just… I know that somewhere in this, that line will be crossed. And that if I let love build between a Seishi and the Miko… if one of the stellar warriors forgets his duty and becomes blinded by love, the whole of our cause could become shrouded in darkness and confusion. We might even fail, if such things are allowed to happen. So I wanted you to realise how serious a situation it is. You must not let your head be turned by anything. Understand? You must not. It may be a matter of life and death, or success and failure.”

“And you’ve seen that? That that will happen?” Suzuno looked startled. Toroki shrugged.

“Not in clear pictures. Just in vague hints and sensations.” She admitted. “I’m drawing them together and forming a picture that I hope will never become clear enough for me to fully decipher. You’re the Miko, . The only one who can change whether or not my visions come into being is you, because you come from a different world and are governed by different rules of existence. You must make sure that that darkness doesn’t engulf Byakko’s cause. And the only way to do that is to stand firm and not let your heart be guided away from what we’re here to do. No matter how fond you are of any of the Seishi, you must keep this in mind at all times.”

“Well, I told you I don’t intend to fall in love.” Suzuno said frankly. “So that should settle it.”

She sighed.

“And I can’t say that enough times for you to believe me, so I’m going to take a nap.” She said decidedly. “We’ll talk some more later. In any case, you and Subaru are both girls. Others might be, too. It might not be as bad as you think — it’s not like I’m completely surrounded by guys, . And I think Tokaki likes Subaru, so I don’t think that’s going to be a problem. Maybe you’re worrying too much, Toroki. It might never happen yet.”

“It’s not Tokaki that concerns me.” Toroki murmured, and Suzuno frowned.

“Then…?”

“Nothing.” Toroki shook her head. “Have your nap. We’ll talk more later, if you want to, but you do look tired. And I might use a sleep too, to be honest. Worrying is a tiring thing too, , and I’ve been doing it a lot lately. I’m sorry, Suzuno-chan. I’ll try not to focus on things too much. , we are here in Kaidou. And we do have another Seishi within our grasp. With any luck things will go smoothly, .”

Chapter 10

Chapter Nine
Present Day, Shouki-mura

"Why are you just sitting there?"

Haruka raised her head from her hands, meeting the curious gaze of a young girl as she sought to dash away the tears that still dampened her long lashes. The stranger was younger than her — perhaps no more than seven at most, yet there was something demanding in her expression that made Haruka hesitate before snapping out a sharp-edged retort.

At her lack of reply, the young girl shuffled closer, peering at her as if she was some kind of exhibit, and Haruka bristled, annoyance flaring in her blue eyes. Some way beyond, a group of older children were gathered, and Haruka realised they had been playing some kind of a game, yet none but the very youngest had chosen to approach her.

"You're the stray kid that Fumi-neechan and the others found yesterday, aren't you?" As the silence threatened to continue, the youngster asked another question, reaching out a podgy finger to touch Haruka's shoulder. "Only yesterday you looked like some kind of mud monster. You look different now."

"Don't poke me!" At this Haruka reacted, reaching up to push the child's hands away. "I'm not some kind of freak for you to gawk at! Leave me alone — I'm not doing anythin' to hurt you!"

"Kiki, come away from her." One of the other children stepped forward at this moment. "She's a wild kid. A desert orphan. She's probably dangerous… they're meant to have claws and shit from climbing rocks, and they tear holes in things with their teeth. You know that we're not supposed to speak to any of those kids, if they come through the village."

"But this one is different," Kiki reasoned, quite unperturbed by either Haruka's unfriendliness or her companion's warning. "I don't think she's dangerous, Kai-nii. She doesn't look scary. She looks sad."

"Noone asked your opinion on anything," Haruka snapped. "I told you. Leave me alone."

“I thought maybe you wanted to play with us,” Kiki suggested innocently. “I thought you might be sad cos we were playin’ an you were here all by yourself.”

“Why would you care?” Haruka countered. “I’m jus’ a desert kid, like your buddy said. I ain’t part of this village and what I do or don’t look like ain’t none of your business. Go back an’ play your little game. I don’t need help from the likes of you!”

“But…”

“You ain’t got any idea what I can do, so just go away!”

“Kiki’s right, Kai-nii,” The other girl of the group stepped forward, toying with the ragged, chewed tail of her hair ribbons as she eyed Haruka pensively. “She *is* the same kid that Gihou and I found collapsed in the middle of the village yesterday. Which means if she’s still here, she must be stayin’ with Geiyo-san an’ that means she can’t be savage. If she was, Geiyo-san’d never help her.”

“Fumi, noone asked you.” The oldest boy, who was perhaps the same age as Haruka herself said frankly, pulling her forcibly back behind him. “Kiki, this isn’t anything we should mess around in. If it’s Geiyo-san’s business, it’s Geiyo-san’s business. It ain’t ours an’ we ain’t to get involved. Your Ma’d whip us both good an’ raw if she thought you were disobeyin’ her.”

“You should listen to your friend, kid,” Haruka scowled. “I’m a dangerous desert rat. The last kids who spent time with me wound up dead, so you should get away from here before you end up the same way. I ain’t goin’ to warn you again. Leave me alone!”

At this, Fumi’s eyes widened, and she stared at the other girl in alarm.

“You… *killed* them?” she whispered. “You… *killed* other kids?”

“Yes. That’s right.” Haruka knew she’d said too much now, yet somehow in the face of these happy village kids she could not stop the resentful words from spilling out. “I’m not like you and your nice little families safe in a place like this. Noone takes care of me, so I take care of myself. An’ I’m strong, too. So you don’t wanna get in my way. Else if you do, I might curse you. I ain’t someone you want to play with. I’m different.”

As she spoke, white flickers of light glimmered around her fingertips, and at the sight of them Kai cursed, grabbing Kiki and forcibly pulling her away from the hot-headed orphan.

“Leave her alone. She’s some kind of freak an’ we don’t need to spend any more time here.” He said firmly. “I told you. She’s a desert kid. She ain’t to do with us.”

He turned, sending Haruka a dark glare.

“An’ if you dare try an’ lay a finger on any of us, I’ll see you’re hunted down an’ punished, so don’t think you’ll get off lightly.” He warned her, his eyes glinting with resolve. “You might think you’re some tough girl but this is our village an’ even if Geiyo-san likes you, it doesn’t mean anyone else will want you here.”

“That’s enough of that, Kai-kun.”

Before Haruka could respond, a fresh voice joined the conversation, and as one person the five youngsters turned, gazing up at the newcomer in surprise.

“Geiyo-san!” Fumi exclaimed, and Anara nodded her head, reaching out to gently touch Kai on the shoulder.

“I know you feel that you have to protect the others, Kai-kun, but you’re taking it a step too far this time,” she said mildly. “Haruka isn’t from this village, but that doesn’t mean you should threaten her.”

“She said she would kill us if we didn’t leave her alone, though!” The second boy, Gihou piped in. “She said she killed other kids and her hands glowed all funny and white!”

“I see.” Anara’s eyes narrowed, and she flitted her gaze across to Haruka, who for some reason felt like all the fight had drained out of her body. “Haruka, is that what you said?”

“Yes,” Haruka said unwillingly, “because they wouldn’t leave me alone. I wasn’t really going to hurt them. I just… they wouldn’t go away, an’ I hate when village kids are crowding round me, like they have everything an’ I ain’t got anything at all.”

“So… it wasn’t true?” Fumi asked cautiously. “You made it up? You were just tryin’ to scare us?”

“But her fingers glowed all white!” Gihou protested. “She was really goin’ to zap us if we didn’t go away!”

“I already said that would be enough.” Anara crouched down at Haruka’s side, setting her bag down on the ground and slipping a gentle, protective arm around the stray’s shoulders. Oddly, Haruka found that this gesture comforted her wrenched emotions somewhat, and so she didn’t push the woman away, merely sinking back against her as the last of her rebellion seeped out of her tired body.

“I think there are probably things that we need to talk about. Sit down, all of you. I won’t have rumours spread like wildfire through this village, so we’ll get to the bottom of it. Yes, you too, Kai-kun. I know you don’t like being told what to do, but this time you can listen as well. All right?”

“Fine,” Kai dropped to the ground, a resentful look in his eyes. “I’m listening.”

“Good,” Anara smiled. “Then let me ask you a question, all of you. How many of you remember the time in the village when Myoume still lived here? Kai, I know you do, since you’re the same age as Haruka, more or less. What about the rest of you? Do you remember when my daughter lived in Shouki?”

“I remember,” Fumi said seriously. “But she went away to live in the mountains an’ she’s only come and visited once or twice since then. But everyone said that was because she was going to work for Byakko an’ do important stuff for him, so that was why. I was only little then, though. Kiki an’ Gihou probably don’t remember right.”

“Possibly not,” Anara acknowledged. “And you were quite young, Fumi, so you might not remember in as clear detail. But Kai, do you? You must do. You must know that Myoume wasn’t like the other village children… that that was one of the reasons she left. Your older brother used to play with her sometimes, when they were younger. You must know about the things she could do.”

“She was Byakko’s person,” Kai agreed. “But I don’t know what that has to do with *her*.”

He pointed a finger at Haruka, and Haruka poked her tongue out in return.

Anara laughed, shaking her head.

“Quite simply, the reason I’m asking you that is because Haruka is like Myoume in some respects,” she said simply. “Like Myoume, she has a white mark on her body. Like Myoume, she’s one of Byakko’s chosen people. And like Myoume, she’s different from other children because she has magic that she doesn’t really understand how to use yet.”

“Magic?” Kiki’s ears pricked up. “*Really*?”

“I don’t want it,” Haruka muttered. “I want it to go away. I never asked to be anything to do with Byakko or any of that shit. I don’t care about that. If I couldn’t do magic… if I couldn’t…”

She faltered, the words sticking in her throat, and Anara's grip on her slim body tightened.

"Tell me, Haru-chan, what exactly your magic is?" she asked gently. "As far as you understand — tell me what you can do."

"I…" Haruka bit her lip, half-intending to refuse, but at the look in Anara's gaze she sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

"Fix stuff, I guess," she said at length. "I don't know how it works, exactly. I jus' know that if someone breaks somethin', I can fix it. Or somethin' like that. Like ripped dresses. Broken shoes. Stuff like that. But I didn't… I didn't mean… it's not like I thought it was. I thought it could just do that. But it… it… I…"

She swallowed hard, tears threatening once more, and Anara sighed.

"I brought something to show you. I hoped you hadn't left the village," she admitted, reaching across to rummage through the bag she had brought along and extracting an old, worn volume, setting it down on the ground. "This was something my husband got from Eiroku in a trade once for medicines from an old man who was ridding himself of a lot of similar tomes. I used it and several others to teach both my children to read and write, so they've seen a lot of use. However, I wanted you to see it too — because I want to make you understand."

"I can't read," Haruka said flatly, making no attempt to look at the book. "So there ain't a point."

"I can read it to you, though, and you can see the pictures." Anara was unmoved, carefully pulling the book into the centre of the circle and opening it, flicking through the pages until she found the one that she wanted.

"That's Byakko!" Kiki exclaimed, pointing excitedly at the picture. "An'…an'…those are all his star thingies. Right?"

"Right," Anara agreed. "This one here belonged to my son, Amefuri. This one is Myoume's as Toroki. And this one…"

She paused, her finger brushing against the sign of Subaru,

"This one is Haruka's. Subaru."

"I'm still not caring." Haruka folded her arms. "So it's a pretty picture. So what?"

"*When Byakko was summoned and Sairou was saved, all seven of the*

Seishi were gathered along with the Miko, Oosugi Suzuno-sama, in order to bring peace to this land."

Anara said softly, running her finger down the columns of fading kanji as she read the text.

"*The chosen were drawn from all across the West and answered the call of the God. Tatara, who held sway over the flora of the world. Tokaki, who commanded the ability to shift like lightning across the land. Amefuri, who could conceal himself like the most fleeting of shadows. Toroki, whose sight touched past, present and future. Karasuki, who appeared before Byakko in two guises. Kokie, mistress of the element of air, and Subaru, the weaver of time.*"

"Weaver of time?" Fumi repeated. "What does that mean, Anara-san?"

"What it says." Anara smiled. "Subaru was one of the longest surviving of Byakko's holy warriors. She lived well over her first century, and so the stories go, was strong and resilient right up till she died. Now her spirit has been reborn within Haruka, and she has been chosen to take on and carry the burdens and the gifts of such an important Seishi by the Tiger himself. It's a tremendous honour, since the power that Subaru possesses is maybe the most powerful of all of the seven Western constellations."

"I don't understand." Despite herself, Haruka eyed the apothecary uncertainly. "I don't see what it means… what is a weaver of time?"

"Does that mean she can, you know, go back to last week or something?" Gihou demanded, and Anara laughed, shaking her head.

"No. Not that kind of time weaver," she said. "What Subaru can do is turn time forwards or back on individual things. Objects. People too, perhaps."

She cast Haruka a smile.

"When you say you can fix things that are broken, what you're actually doing is sending them back to an earlier state, before they became damaged," she explained. "Right now you've only just begun to use it, so you haven't realised the full strength and implication of the magic. But at its most powerful, Haru-chan, it might even be strong enough to bring someone back from the brink of death. The power you have is not a destructive one. On the contrary, it's a healing one. It has the power to take the most wrecked of items and return it to its pristine state. And not only that."

She patted the book gently.

“There are many references in this book to how Subaru used her power to keep Tatara eternally young, in order that he would not age and die and therefore could protect the Miko’s treasure until the coming of a foreign Miko to claim it.” She added. “For well over ninety years she kept that spell in place, preserving Tatara in the form of a twenty year old man so that he could even evade the end of his life. Her power is a tremendous one, all in all. What you have inside of you is something very special indeed. Something from which you shouldn’t try to run.”

“But… I…” Haruka gazed at her hands, then up at her companion in disbelief. “I can really do all those things? I mean, one day? If I really tried…? All that stuff… you didn’t make it up? It’s really true?”

“As true as any written account of Sairou’s history,” Anara agreed.

“Then why… in the cave…” Haruka faltered, and Anara put a hand on her shoulder.

“Something happened in the mountains, didn’t it?” she asked softly. “Something you think was your fault. But I can’t imagine that Subaru’s power could ever be used to kill someone. Whatever happened to your friends — I’m sure that it wasn’t you who caused it. Will you tell me, Haruka? I won’t be angry with you, or send you away from the village. But if you don’t explain, we can’t understand. And I think we need to, if it’s bothering you so much. , you’re a very special individual. You’ve been chosen by Byakko for this task, whatever it proves to be.”

Haruka swallowed hard, twisting her fingers together absently as she summoned her courage.

“We were in this cave with gems all over the wall, like stars,” she said falteringly. “Me an’ Hami an’ the chibi, sorting out the food. An’ one of the walls was cracked, so they told me to fix it. It was our cave, you see. Was goin’ to be, anyway. So I tried an’ used my magic, but when I did… when I did…”

She closed her eyes, a shiver going through her young body as the memory ripped across her senses once more.

“Somethin’ thick an’ dark filled the cave an’ the next thing I knew the chibi was on the ground an’ Hami was talkin’ all strange an’ shit,” she said, her voice wavering as she fought to control her emotions. “She said a bunch of stuff I didn’t understand. Then when Azuhi came back, it was like… all this black shit came out of Hami an’ she collapsed on the floor. She was dead, like all the life’d been sucked out of her. Chibi too. An’ I… I was the only one left. I know I felt

somethin' inside of me, an' I thought maybe… maybe it was me that did it. Azuhi told me that he saw me, an' that it was my fault. But I don't… I don't know. I don't want to be the one who did it. I don't want…"

"Oh, Haru-chan," Anara hugged her tightly, and Haruka buried her head in the woman's shoulder. "I don't know what it was you encountered in the cave, but I am absolutely sure that it wasn't your magic that killed your friends. You're Byakko's — remember that, all right? Byakko's magic emits *white* energy. Not black. Whatever hurt them was something else. Not you. Something that was maybe hiding in the cave before you got there. Okay? It wasn't your fault. I'm sure of that. I'm sure that Subaru's magic couldn't have killed anyone in that kind of situation. More likely it *protected* you — even if it couldn't protect your friends from harm."

"Then that makes it my fault too, doesn't it?" Haruka raised plaintive eyes to her companion's. "Because I couldn't protect 'em? If I have this from Byakko, shouldn't I have? But I tried to protect the chibi an' I couldn't… I couldn't…"

"Shh." Anara shook her head. "Stop it. You're not to blame. I'm certain of that. Whatever happened in that cave happened for some other reason. It didn't happen because you have Subaru's magic inside of you. Byakko chose you for a reason, and that reason was that he has faith in you. Even if everyone else seems to have abandoned you, he hasn't — he's selected you out of everyone to be reborn with that particular Seishi spirit. Which means he believes wholeheartedly in your abilities. And that's why you survived in the cave. That's why you came here, so I could tell you about Byakko and, maybe, help you find the right people who can guide you forwards from here. Do you understand? You're not alone at all. Especially not now."

"So she's… really… Byakko's?" Kai looked flummoxed. "Like Myoume-neesan?"

"Yes," Anara agreed. "But I don't want you kids making a big thing of it. Haruka's not the same as you in some ways, but she's not dangerous either. And I hope, for the time being, she'll stay here. Because I'm sure that if Byakko's called her, there's a reason and we need to look into it further."

Haruka swallowed hard.

"You really think that I'm that important?" she whispered, and Anara nodded.

"If you'll let me, I'll try and help you find out why you're here like

this," she said frankly. "I'm not Byakko's myself, but sometimes I feel like he chose me too, because of Myoume and Miramu. And if I can help you, Haru-chan…"

Haruka bit her lip, then, slowly, she nodded her head.

"You're the first person who's wanted to, since Pa died," she murmured. "Even if it is because I have this power, I guess it's better'n nothing."

"It's not about that at all," Anara assured her, touching her cheek gently. "To me, Myoume was always Myoume and Miramu, Miramu. Their stellar selves were quite separate people in many ways, and I never saw them when I looked at my children. But if you have this calling, Haruka, we have to find out why."

She frowned.

"Maybe by going back to the cave in which your friends died."

"*No!*" Horror flooded Haruka's expression and she shook her head violently. "I don't want to go back there! Not now, not ever, and noone else should go either!"

"It might be necessary," Anara said quietly. "What happened there might well be connected with why you're here. And if it is, we need to know about it. One way or another, we do. I know Myoume'd say the same if she was here. That's the first thing we need to do. Investigate the cave."

"What if you got hurt too?" Haruka demanded.

"I'm sure that won't happen." Anara shook her head. "And if we don't go, then we might make things worse. Don't look so frightened, Haruka. We'll get to the bottom of this — and I'm sure, we'll find out exactly why it is Byakko's called you here after over a century of peace in Sairou!"

Well, it had been a gamble.

The archer sat back against the gnarled trunk of the aging elm tree, idly toying with the point of an arrow as he gazed across the palace grounds to the small network of rooms that Rouhei called his own. His shot had been perfect, and his judgement of the man's reflexes equally impeccable, but even so he had quickly realised the limitations of his choice of ally. A Han, yes. He was the Prince's man, without doubt. But no more than that.

It was not his intention to sacrifice lives unecessarily.

At this ironic thought, the archer's lip curled in wry humour, and he shook his head slightly, tossing the arrowhead up in the air and catching it in his opposite fist. On that subject, Byakko had been quite clear.

"*Enough blood has been spilt already*," The God had said. "*Spill no more, my friend, if it can at all be helped. This is the most important rule of all — my people have suffered already and they do not need to suffer more.*"

"But that might be easier said than done, Tiger-kami-sama." The archer raised seiran eyes to the cloud-mottled sky, clasping the arrow head more tightly as he watched the wisps of white drifting aimlessly towards the horizon. "This Rouhei is probably as skilled as any other member of the clan when it comes to the matters of court security. But he's not the same, and whether he stands a chance when pitted against an enemy of this nature, I guess time will only tell. Still, I have to acknowledge that the memories I have of the interior of that place are first class. You promised me that I could keep that information, and for the first time since I've come here, I think I'm starting to make it count."

He dropped the arrowhead into his pocket, stretching out more comfortably on the branch. Below him, men and women of the court hurried about their business, but he did not bother about them, knowing that not a single one of them would be able to see him perched in the leafy boughs above.

"This place is not a safe place, just as it wasn't one a hundred years ago," he mused. "Byakko said I would find one of his people here, but instead I've found the Han assassin trying desperately to draw lines between stars, and the distinctive taint of a dark spirit poisoning the atmosphere. If Byakko's chosen has left the court, that might be a good sign — at least if they're not in this environment, Makiko might find it harder to locate them and harm them. At least, I don't know if she can sense the embers of her curse inside of the Tiger's Seishi. I hope that she hasn't reached a high enough level to do that yet, but I have to be prepared for it. You said that, didn't you, Byakko? That I should not underestimate this enemy any more for being dead a hundred years."

He glanced at his hands, taking in the faint scarring across his skin. They were not real scars, he knew that, but faint relics of many pasts spent in turmoil and uncertainty. Understanding did not bring automatic release, he had learnt that all too easily. But yet, somehow,

even though not all of the memories that swirled through him were palatable, little by little he was beginning to put them into perspective.

“Everything ties together and makes much more sense,” he muttered. “If I’d known that the last time, I might have done things in a different way. But I can’t go back. Noone can do that. I can just go forward, and hope that what I do is enough.”

A bird flew out of the branches above and he scowled at its retreating form, resentful of its freedom as it soared up towards the sky. He was a chained beast, just as his God was, and his time was more limited than Makiko’s was. If she wanted revenge, she could wait forever to take it. That luxury was not one he had. Although he was not like the Han astrologer or the young girl beneath the village tree, he knew that his time was as limited as theirs was. He was not eternal. And Makiko, unless Byakko was summoned once more, could continue to pollute Sairou’s people forever.

“The fact she came here before I did isn’t a surprise, but it is a disappointment,” he murmured softly. “One I can’t afford not to act on. My suspicions about the young girl were right. That Subaru kid really did bring Jiene’s words true, and Makiko really has been freed from her prison. That means only one thing… that Byakko no Miko must have returned to Sairou. And dammit, my next job is to try and find her, before Makiko’s bitch spirit finds a way to possess and manipulate her for her own ends!”

The sensation had been unmistakeable.

Makiko gazed out across the palace grounds, knitting Sashi’s pretty features into an expression of consternation as she struggled to get a bearing on the impulse that had shot through her senses moments before. For an instant she had felt the unmistakeable chi of her one-time assassin, searing through the atmosphere like an arrow fired from a bow. Then, as soon as it had come, it had once more disappeared, leaving her feel both angry and uneasy at it’s proximity.

Could he have returned to find her so soon? Surely not, she reasoned, as she rested the Ueke Princess’s finely manicured hands on the sill. Unlike her, who existed eternally beyond death, the reborn souls of those around her did not possess the memories of their past incarnations, and it would be impossible for even one of Byakko’s people to be able to track her quite so quickly. She was long dead, . The only person who knew definitively of her presence at court was the being whose body she currently used to move from place to place

undetected, and though occasionally she felt Sashi's spirit struggle within her, she knew she had the Ueke Princess's soul well under her control.

But a Seishi was different.

She curled her lip, turning away from the grounds as she contemplated.

She had no way of knowing how deeply her curse still ran through Byakko's people. With Tenkou's destruction, she realised, her own power had weakened considerably and even now she was a literal shadow of her former self. With Tenkou's help, she knew, she would have become a true immortal demon, with magic strong enough to overcome the most resilient of stellar warriors. But Tenkou was gone, and there was no point in clinging onto regrets that she could not change. Her mentor may have been destroyed, but she was still here. And she still had her revenge to carry out on this pitiful Western nation.

She would find and kill each of Byakko's people, one by one. She would discredit and torment them as she had never done before. And more, if the Tiger dared to send a Miko to the ShijinTenchishou, this time she would not let the girl escape. Last time, somehow, Byakko had spirited his Priestess away before the curse could curl itself around her heart. But this time, Makiko was resolved, would be different. If the game was to be played out again, she would not be as slow to arms this time. She would find and destroy the Priestess, too. A tainted soul could not be brought back to the ShijinTenchishou as Priestess, . Byakko no Miko must be pure. And if they failed this time, she would ensure that they would never have another chance to succeed.

"Sashi-hime?"

The voice of her lady in waiting startled her and she turned, offering the woman a faint smile.

"Rairi?" she murmured. "Is there something amiss?"

"You seemed upset, my Lady — I wondered if there was something you might need me for?" Rairi bowed her head, raising her gaze to eye her mistress quizzically.

Makiko bit down on her initial impatience, her mind teasing through Sashi's detailed memories of court life as slowly she formulated a plan.

"I think that it's been a long day," she said slowly. "It seems like

the court has become so much less merry of late. Do you feel that too, Rairi? Or is it simply my imagination?"

"Perhaps you're missing Ouba-hime, my Lady," Rairi suggested, a smile touching her lips. "The court is certainly duller without her presence, and I think a lot of people are missing her badly."

"Ouba…" Makiko pursed her lips, darting her senses across Sashi's recollections of the Princess of Sairou. "Yes. Maybe you are right. Since Ouba left, the court has not been the same. I do miss her, a good deal. Perhaps that is what troubles me. Although…"

She sighed, smoothing her skirt absently over her knees as the vague traces of a plan began to formulate in her mind.

"Rairi, I can trust you, can't I?" she asked softly, and Rairi looked surprised, nodding her head.

"With all faith, Hime-sama," she agreed. "You know that I would never break a confidence that you invested in me to keep."

"Yes, I know," A slow smile touched Sashi's pretty features, even as Makiko's derision for the servant's loyalty flourished inside of her. "Then I will tell you. The truth is, I did not sleep as well as I might have done these past couple of nights. Dreams have plagued me, and I have been unsure how to interpret them."

"Dreams, Hime?" Rairi knelt down on the floor, glancing up at her mistress in confusion. "Bad dreams?"

"No, I don't think so," Makiko shook her head. "More… a dream relating to Kitora-sama, Byakko's blessed Guardian spirit."

"Kitora-sama?" Rairi's eyes widened. "Do you mean… a message from the Mage herself?"

Makiko nodded her head, inwardly marvelling at the girl's gullibility. Rairi was a Funoki who had come from the Northern province with Sashi on her marriage to Nefuru, and was of the same faith, her family steeped in the traditions of Kitora's cult. Of all of Sashi's servants, Rairi was the most likely to believe without question a message from the divine, and Makiko revelled in her ability to manipulate these fools as easily as puppets on strings.

"I almost think she was trying to warn me," she said now, injecting a note of sadness into her tones. "Byakko protects this land from harm, thanks to the diligence of those who came to answer Byakko's call a century ago. Thanks to them, we all have peace and tranquility. However…"

“However…?” Rairi looked anxious. “Something is amiss, Hime?”

“The legend of Byakko is over, and the land was saved,” Makiko said carefully. “You know that, don’t you, Rairi? By Kitora’s grace and Byakko’s benevolence, we all have freedom and security. Byakko came and the people who served him united to help him achieve those goals. And Byakko no Miko — Oosugi Suzuno — she wished for the peace of the West and the end to war and strife.”

“Yes, Hime. I know the legend as well as any citizen of Sairou.”

“Not a legend, Rairi, but history,” Makiko chided her. “These things happened. They are beyond doubt.”

“True,” Rairi agreed. “But Kitora-sama’s message? Sashi-hime-sama, please, share with me your concerns. If Kitora-sama has spoken to you again, we would do well to hear her warnings.”

She smiled.

“You were the one who told me Kitora-sama had guided you to accept the Prince’s proposal and come South to Arudo,” she added. “Her judgement is sound… I would like to hear her words, if you will share them with me.”

Makiko eyed her for a moment. Then she nodded.

“Kitora-sama believes that a demon is lurking in Sairou,” she said softly. “And this demon is trying to upset the balance of peace by sending imposters into the world. This demon wishes to infiltrate even the blessed mantle of Byakko no Miko and taint it by bringing her minions of chaos to hurt us all. Seven people claiming to be Byakko’s people who, if allowed to pass and succeed, will bring the destruction of this land. And it frightens me, Rairi, since I heard a rumour that Ouba was sent from this place in order to protect her from incoming danger. Yet I worry… that she might be a target for these people. And that, if we’re not careful, our peace and security might come tumbling down around us.”

“Imposters?” Rairi whitened, and Makiko nodded.

“There is no need for Byakko’s legend to repeat,” she said simply. “I don’t know if it’s even possible for it to do so. Suzuno-sama succeeded the first time. The Seishi summoned the God, and brought peace. There is no reason for any of them to return. So it troubles me that Rouhei is so sure he’s encountered evidence of people with Byakko’s mark. Kitora-sama is closer to Byakko than any of us, and she wouldn’t send me a warning if it wasn’t the absolute truth. I’m certain of that with all my heart and soul.”

She hesitated, and then got to her feet, moving across the chamber to her dresser. Carefully she opened the small wooden jewel chest, extracting the broken charm of protection that had been shattered when Makiko had forcibly entered Sashi's body. Slowly she held it up.

"Then this happened." She said gravely. "Without any reason, the pearl separated from the silver, as if something had cracked straight across it. This is an omen, sure enough, that Kitora's warning to me is true. There are people in Sairou now who mean us all great harm."

She clutched her hands to her chest.

"I have a husband and a baby son whose lives I fear for," she added, injecting just the right amount of emotion into her tones. "And if Ouba is also at risk… Rairi, I couldn't bear it if they got hurt. But I don't know what to do about it. Whether to tell Nefuru or whether not to trouble him when he is already so worried about his sister's progress to the East."

Rairi was silent for a moment, pursing her lips. Then she bowed her head in the Princess's direction.

"I share your faith in Kitora's word, Hime-sama," she said softly. "And if she sends such a warning, it must be considered true. Byakko's legend is over, . That means that any other coming of Byakko's people must be false. And Sairou must be protected from their darkness."

"You think so, also?" Makiko hid her triumph, sending the other woman a faint smile. "Perhaps it would be better, then, for me to act. To at least do my best to neutralise this threat, even if I can't do anything decisive with what I find."

She set the charm back down on the unit.

"Rairi, go at once to the military barracks," she said quietly. "Tell Captain Zarin of my personal Guard to come here and report to me directly. I have a charge to give him which cannot be delayed in its carrying out. I want him to find them — *all* of them — and bring them to the palace for investigation and interrogation. Then we will surely see what this demon intends, if we have them all here before us!"

Author's Note

So I keep promising to upload the chapters that are completed but I keep not getting around to it. I'm doing it bit by bit now though… sorry for the wait ;) Who knows, maybe I'll get the inspiration to finish the wretched thing, though its been so long…

Chapter 11

Chapter Ten

Another cold morning on the mountain.

Arina pulled the thick, woollen cloak more tightly around her body, leaning up against the wall of the small Meihi dwelling with a heavy sigh. It was two days since the trip to Touran, and in that time she had barely seen more than a vague glimpse of Kishayi as he went about his daily tasks. Though Bakaru and Kaeli had both explained to her that, as physician Mikoyi's most diligent apprentice, he had many duties to take care of, she could not help but think that he was somehow avoiding her company.

She sighed again, clenching and unclenching her fists as she remembered his expression when he had left her.

"Even though we can't actually speak, it's like he doesn't want to come near me. As though he's afraid of me, now, because of that stupid book of Suzuno-san's," she muttered, kicking idly at a stone and watching it roll across the hard, cold ground with little enthusiasm. "Oh, damn that diary! It's done nothing but get me into a heap of trouble. And I did hope that maybe we were going to be friends — but I guess that's that, now."

Another chill wind whipped through her hair at that moment and she shivered involuntarily, glancing up at the sky as if she expected snow to descend on her from the heavens at any moment. Even in the few days she had been among the Meihi people, she had learnt that blizzards could spring out of nowhere, but today there were few clouds and none of them had the ominous grey sheen that told of hidden frozen loads.

Part of the problem was that, no matter how kind they were to her, she was not a part of this world. Though some of them spoke her language, few of the Meihi had the same fluency as Kaeli or Bakaru, and though none of them had treated her like an outsider, she knew that was blatantly what she was. Everywhere she looked she saw people pale enough to be snow themselves, silver hair glinting in the feeble sunlight, and vivid amethyst eyes glimmering with light. In those short few days, Arina had stopped thinking of them as being unusual. In fact, aside from the trip to Touran, she had not seen a single person with dark hair or dark eyes except for her own

reflection, and little by little she was coming to the wry conclusion that it was she who was the unusual one.

"Outsider," she murmured, turning on her heel and pushing back the heavy wooden door, stepping into the chamber beyond. The fire still smouldered in the grate, carefully built around with stone so as to prevent stray embers from shooting out and setting light to any of the elaborate fabrics that covered every vestige of the Meihi living space. Though the world outside was frozen, bleak and cold, Arina mused to herself, the inside of their homes could not be more different. Across every surface were the indications of the indiginous skills the Meihi people possessed, from the deftly woven wool of rugs, clothing and floor coverings to the elaborate dyes and carvings that decorated the doors and windowframes in characters and imagery that Arina did not understand. Even the fire itself had not escaped this expression of life and nature, for engraved in each of the stones that gave it support were the distinctive curls and weaves of ebony flames.

For a moment she stared at it, both envying and admiring the skill that had put the patterns in place. Then she sighed, shaking her head as if to clear it.

Stepping through to her own small chamber, she sank down on her bed, her gaze falling on her bag which had been carelessly pushed on one side since the conversation with Kishayi two afternoons earlier. As she settled herself more comfortably on the brightly patterned bed cover, she reached across to grab the strap, pulling it towards her and unzipping it as she carefully tipped out her meagre belongings.

It wasn't much, she reflected mournfully, touching the curled edges of the crumpled magazine with a flicker of regret. The last vestiges of her world, compacted into a tiny holding space and flung with her through time and space to a place that she did not understand.

Was she feeling homesick, at last?

The irony of this thought brought a faint smile to her face, and slowly she shook her head. If it was homesickness, it wasn't for the empty home or the latchkey lifestyle she had led for almost as long as she could remember. This world was the world in which her closest friend currently stayed, and somehow she knew that Hikari was a more important person to her than either of her distant, preoccupied parents. If they had noticed her absence, it would be a miracle in itself, she reflected bitterly. And if they were worried about her, well, so be it.

But this place was not her world, and no matter how little hold she

thought Tokyo had on her, she knew that deep inside of her something ached for even the faintest snippet of familiarity.

“I’m like an alien, dropped onto some completely unknown planet,” she muttered, scooping up her cigarettes and her lighter and getting to her feet as she put one to her lips, lighting it carefully and tossing the lighter back down onto the bed. “I don’t belong here. I have no idea how Hikari managed to adjust to this — if the place she’s gone is anything like Koku-zan. People are friendly — they couldn’t be more friendly. But how can I do anything if I don’t understand the first thing about this world? I can’t even speak the language of those around me.”

She let out a slow exhale of smoke, sinking back down onto the bed as a wave of self-pity began to wash over her. In Tokyo, she had always been used to being the centre of attention where her friends were concerned, and she had never liked things flying out of her control. Yet this world was entirely out of her hands, and she wasn’t sure whether she liked it.

She glanced at the cigarette ruefully. It was the first time, she realised, since she had woken up in the Meihi village that she had been lured by the call of the nicotine. Back home, she knew, she would have gone through a packet or more by this time. But in the rush of everything that had happened, it had not even occured to her to indulge in her usual comfort. Now, however, with her doubts and insecurities creeping up over her, she had felt the cravings slipping back and, without thinking she had done what she had so often done before — hidden her woes behind a cigarette.

“And who knows if they even have cigarettes in this world,” she murmured, putting the stick to her lips once more. “Probably not. I wish I’d looked that up before I decided to go crazy about this legend. I haven’t many left, and if I don’t know how to get back, I’m going to be going crazy in a few days from now.”

“Arina?”

A voice at the door startled her and she jerked around, dropping the cigarette in her surprise. As the warm tip touched the fabric of the rug, it began to smoulder, and she let out an exclamation, scrambling to put it out before it could take hold and cause serious damage. Impulsively she flung her hands down on the smoking fabric, oblivious of the danger as she extinguished the flame.

“What are you doing?”

Bakaru’s calm, curious tones made her look up in embarrassment,

scooping up the now extinguished cigarette.

“You made me jump,” she said sheepishly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do any damage.”

“Damage?” Bakaru stepped forward, peering down at the faintly singed rug edge, then frowning. He held out his hand to her, and Arina bit her lip, swallowing hard as slowly she relinquished her prize to her host.

“It’s something from my world,” she explained hastily. “I wasn’t trying to do any harm, I just…”

“I see.” Bakaru eyed the cigarette for a moment, putting it to his nose and sniffing it cautiously. Then his eyes narrowed, and he set it on one side, reaching out to take Arina’s hands in his. Gently he turned them over, uncurling her fingers to reveal the red marks that had begun to blister across her palms.

“You should not put your bare skin to fire, Arina. Surely you’re old enough to have learnt that rule?”

The words were soft, and only faintly chiding, yet Arina flushed red, wishing she could be swallowed up by the rug itself as she nodded her head.

“I… I just…”

“If you are old enough to know how to light a fire, you should surely know how to put it out, child,” Bakaru offered her a smile. “I don’t know what these things are from your world, but I think it would be better if you didn’t try and use them until you’ve learnt that lesson. This time you’re lucky — the burning is minor, but it will sting.”

“I didn’t even think,” Arina confessed. “I’m sorry, Bakaru-san. I just didn’t want to burn the rug, and well, I didn’t expect you…”

She faltered, and Bakaru pulled her gently to her feet.

“I think Mikoyi should see them, to ensure they don’t become worse than they are,” he said frankly. “Kishayi is helping him, so it will be a chance for the two of you to speak.”

“That’s easier said than done.” Arina grimaced. “I’m sorry, Bakaru-san. I think I really scared him the other day. He… won’t even meet my gaze for long. And…”

She paused, glancing across at the cigarettes.

“I think I was feeling a bit lonely and homesick,” she admitted. “I

haven't touched those things since I came here, till now. I feel like a real foreigner here, that's the truth."

"Are people unkind to you?" Bakaru looked startled, as he led the way through the house and out into the cold winter air outside. Arina shook her head.

"Not at all," she assured him. "But I'm not from here. I don't look like you, or speak like you, or understand the things you do. This place is totally different from anything I've ever known, and I feel a bit stranded. That's all."

"I suppose that's natural," Bakaru's face cleared, "and I understand the feeling. We have all felt it at times, those of us who have spent time in the outside world."

"I… I suppose so." Arina pursed her lips. "I suppose when you're a slave, it must feel like that a lot."

"Yes," Bakaru agreed. "This place is not what you might consider a normal settlement because of it. Whereas in the past, Meihi would live in undisturbed clusters for generations, with entire families passing skills and trades from parent to child, this place is different. We are all Meihi, true enough, but some are from the Eastern lands and some of us born in the North. We come from far and wide, and have little to bequeath our children except what we have built up in the fifteen years or so since we came here. For that reason, there is still too much wariness to expect many of the young Meihi to want to learn about the outside world. For you to come to us from there would no doubt be strange enough, but to come from a different world completely…"

"Exactly." Arina nodded her head. "It would help if I could speak more Meihi, I think, but I suppose that's impossible. I never heard it before I came here, . I don't think it exists in my world."

"Probably not," Bakaru reflected, "but don't be downcast. My message will reach Lilaihi in due course, and he will no doubt respond with equal speed, knowing the man that he is. If we can get you to Shunhou, somehow, I know he will find a way to help you. And the language spoken in Kutou is not dissimilar to your own — a matter of accent, perhaps, but not much more. You'll no doubt feel that fitting in is easier, there."

"I don't want you to think that I don't like you people, or that I'm ungrateful," Arina pinkened. "I sound like a spoiled brat, moaning when you saved my life and everything. Just…"

"Your friend is in the South, correct?" Bakaru's eyes twinkled. "I

understand. So will Lilaihi. , it took twenty five years for him to be reuinited with his blood sister Lirayi. He knows what it is like to seek someone dear who is far away."

He pushed open the door of Mikoyi's workroom, ushering her inside.

"For the time being, let Mikoyi see your hand," he advised. "Just in case it needs treating."

Arina stepped into the small room, the smell of herbs assailing her as she glanced around her. This was a very different kind of chamber, she realised, for though it was as full of carvings and imagery as the house, it was clearly a place of work. Row upon row of dried herbs lined one wall, with vials and boxes stacked neatly beneath, each of them having been carefully labelled in the Meihi's scrawling script by some kind of blade. A fire blazed in the hearth, over which was hung a tar-coated rack tied in place by thick thongs of what looked like leather but, on closer inspection proved to be more of the Meihi's distinctive weaving, dipped in the same black substance to protect it from the flames below. On the rack sat two or three ceramic bowls, and liquids of differing shades bubbled within each.

On the other side of the room was a low-slung bed, and beside it, a desk on which were piled a series of scrolls tied with coloured wool. In the centre of the chamber, robed in what could only be described as a work apron and carefully counting seeds into a bowl was the village's physician, Mikoyi, a tall, lean man in his middle years with his thick silver hair cropped to his shoulders and pulled back from his face in a short, workmanlike tail. At the sight of him, Bakaru hurried forward, saying something in his soft, smooth Meihi dialect. At his words, Mikoyi nodded his head, casting Arina a smile as he gestured for her to show him.

Automatically Arina did as she was bidden, vaguely aware for the first time of the stinging pain of the cigarette burn against her skin. She really had been stupid, she mused ruefully, inwardly thanking her lucky stars that none of her school-friends had seen her so hopelessly lacking in composure.

"Is burnt, not bad." Mikoyi was speaking now, in his broken, clipped rendition of her language. "Wait. Will medicine."

Arina nodded, and Mikoyi hurried across the chamber, calling something to someone beyond as he did so. A cloth screen was hurriedly pulled back, and Arina's eyes opened wide as she met the startled gaze of her rescuer across the herb-smoked chamber.

“Kishayi,” she whispered, and at the sound of his name, Kishayi started, looking at first uncomfortable, then apologetic as he bowed his head towards her. He passed something to the physician, who took it, shaking it against his ear, then nodding his head. He murmured something to Kishayi, who reddened, then cast Arina another glance. Then, with another jerky bow, he disappeared back into the other room.

Despite herself, Arina felt deflated, and Bakaru sighed.

“I will speak to him,” he said resignedly. “Arina, stay and let Mikoyi tend your hand. His ointment will make it throb a little tonight, but it will be mostly healed over by the morning so try and bear with it, all right? And if you need me, please, just call my name. I’ll come.”

“You don’t have to…” Arina began, but Bakaru smiled, shaking his head.

“If I don’t, noone else can,” he chided gently. “Even you can’t communicate properly with the boy, can you? I understand how you feel and how he does, so I’m the obvious person to play intermediary. Don’t worry about it, Arina. The Meihi have undertaken to care for you till you can be transferred to where your friend is. And we take that promise seriously — it’s all part of the same thing.”

He winked, resting his hand briefly on her shoulder, and then he was gone.

Arina bit her lip.

“I wish I could talk to Kishayi myself,” she muttered. “I’ve never been the kind of girl who’s liked having go-betweens.”

“Hold still. Will sting,” Mikoyi instructed her at that moment, and Arina forced her attention back to the present as the capable physician began to dab his yellowish ointment onto her hand with a fine-tipped brush. At the sudden twinging sensation she winced, biting her lip, and Mikoyi smiled.

“Not long,” he assured her. “Still, please.”

Arina nodded her head, resisting the urge to pull her hand back, but her gaze strayed to the room at the back of the workshop.

No matter what Bakaru said, she reflected sadly, she couldn’t take back the book’s strange magical aura. As things stood, she might find herself leaving the village without ever spending more time with Kishayi.

Somehow she knew that she disliked this thought, even if as yet she didn't know more than a few words of his language.

"He saved my life," she reflected. "And if I can avoid it, I really don't want us to part like this!"

"And that's the safest route from the palace here into Kutou?"

Kinka glanced up from the map that was spread across one of the large oak tables, casting Aoiketsu a questioning look as she did so. "You're quite sure about it, Kaiga-dono? There's nothing we might have overlooked? Ouba-hime's safety is of prime importance, , and…"

"I'm quite sure." Aoiketsu nodded his head, frustration glittering in his seiran eyes. "I've gone over and over this with a fine tooth comb and it's the only route we can realistically take if we have a hope of getting to Shunhou without problems. I'm a native of Kutou, let's not forget. I know my way across this terrain with my eyes shut. You could do me the favour of trusting my judgement a little bit when it comes to plotting routes."

"You're still as much a stranger to me as anyone at this court is," Kinka said pragmatically. "I swore in blood to my Prince that I'd protect his sister with my life. I'll do it, if I have to, but I'd rather not be in the position where it's necessary. The journey from Arudo to Shunhou is long and dangerous enough as it is. It's no slight to you, Kaiga-dono, but I find it hard to put all my trust in a foreigner's judgement. Ouba-hime is nothing more to you than a commodity in transit. To me she's something more, and I have to be sure."

Aoiketsu's eyes narrowed, and slowly he shook his head.

"You're wrong," he said frankly. "This journey isn't as much of a duty for me as you might think. Remember, Princess Ouba is not the only treasure we'll be protecting. Against my advice Hikari's sought the Emperor's permission to join the party, and I can't overrule Reizeitei-sama's consent. But if you think I'd do anything to put that girl in danger, you should think again. We both have things to protect on this journey, and you can rest assured that for that reason I've plotted the safest route that I can think of from here to the East."

Kinka sighed, rubbing her temples.

"I'm sorry," she said contritely. "I suppose perhaps I'm being too forceful about this. I'm just worried, that's all. I don't know why Lady Hikari decided she'd join us, but like you, I'm not inclined to object to it when Ouba-hime seems to be in favour of her company on the

journey East. But I know that no matter how peaceful a country is, there's always dangers. Even in Sairou, the same is true. Rogues still operate under the radar in many quarters, and that at least is familiar territory to me. This is not. And I dislike things being out of my control."

"Your comrade Sayo is less concerned about leaving it to me," Aoiketsu reflected, leaning up against one of the immense red-stained columns and folding his arms across his chest. "Why is it that you're so much more troubled by it, Kinka-dono? That it's your mistress's safety at stake, I understand. Believe me, I wholeheartedly understand. But even so, we're on the same side. This is my Emperor's wish as well as yours. I'm bound by blood and honour to do his bidding as much as you are your Prince's. And this match means a good deal to Kutou, just as it will to Sairou. It's in noone's interests to let anything befall the Princess. Believe me."

"I suppose I know that," Kinka admitted, crossing the chamber and resting her hands on the stone sill as she gazed out across the peaceful palace grounds. In the distance, sconced in the royal gardens she could just about make out the outline of her Princess and the former Seiryuu no Miko, and she sighed, shaking her head.

"I worry far too much," she murmured. "I know better than anyone that treason can strike very close to the throne."

"And you think that someone will betray you, before you reach Shunhou?" Aoiketsu raised an eyebrow. "Or is it that you think Kutou will do the betraying, Kinka-dono? That there is some elaborate dark scheme at work beneath the facade of cooperation?"

"Is there?" Kinka turned to glance at him, and Aoiketsu offered her a wry smile, shaking his head.

"Of all nations, Kutou is probably the most experienced at such covert scheming," he acknowledged. "That was the province of the former Priest of Seiryuu's shrine and those who followed him. This Kutou is not the Kutou of Shoukitei, or that of predecessors who marched roughshod over other people's livelihoods to gain power and influence. My Emperor is a different kind of King. He is a soldier, but he is not a violent man. He fought to survive, and to bring peace to his land, once and for all. Marrying Princess Ouba is the last piece in that puzzle. If he can sire an heir of good enough blood to succeed him, then Kutou can look to the future with hope. So you have nothing to fear. In truth, I think that Sairou are a stronger political force than Kutou are at the minute. It would be a foolish act indeed to goad them into attacking Shunhou. And my Emperor is not a foolish man."

“So I have heard many times,” Kinka admitted, “by many different people.”

“Yet you don’t believe it?”

“I can’t afford to believe it entirely.” Kinka glanced at her hands. “I want to, badly, but to believe it would be to let down my guard. And I mustn’t do that — no matter what.”

“You are an unusual type of noblewoman, Kei Kinka-dono.” Aoiketsu eyed her thoughtfully. “You carry yourself as though you are of high-born blood, yet you speak, sometimes, like you’ve trained as a soldier and are primed for battle. Which is it? What kind of lady companion are you, truly, where the Princess is concerned?”

“To be born of noble blood and to be noble are two things,” Kinka said simply. “Noone can say that all they are is what they were born. We all move forwards, depending on the situation we find ourselves in. In my case, I am an orphan who owes her life and her current favour to the kindness of the royal house. So I repay that kindness with my loyalty — since there is nothing else I have to give.”

“It’s like that, is it?” Aoiketsu looked pensive. “Then perhaps we have something in common, Kinka-dono.”

“In common?” Kinka looked startled. “With you?”

“You needn’t sound so repulsed by the idea,” Aoiketsu snorted. “Even if I am from the East, I thought I’d already told you that you’ve no reason to consider me an enemy.”

“I’m sorry,” Kinka looked rueful. “I have a bad tendency to bluntness on occasion… forgive me. I didn’t mean to cast that implication on it — I was just confused as to how we could be alike. You are from Kutou, and trained there under the care of your Emperor from a very early age, . You must have heard the name Kei Engai in that time, surely? You could not have been oblivious to his existence within your land.”

“Kei Engai?” Aoiketsu’s eyes narrowed, and he nodded.

“I remember,” he agreed. “At least, I remember the conflict and the stories that went around the barracks at the time. He was a rebel — an exile from some distant land who joined with the Emperor’s enemies and caused a fair bit of trouble for us, one way or another. There was a tremendous battle, during which the Emperor was badly injured. After that, I know, several of the rebels were hunted down on Hyoushin-sama’s orders, and brought to trial. All of those found guilty of collaboration were put to death for treason, and others who had

fled to outside of Kutou's jurisdiction died in mysterious circumstances. It was a ruthless, sweeping gesture of justice in the Emperor's name, and I remember it well because I remember how firmly Hyoushin-sama dealt with it all. Of all of the rebels apprehended, only one wasn't executed. That was Kei Engai. But other than that… I don't know what happened next, or why he was spared."

"He wasn't spared," Kinka said frankly, turning her gaze back to the horizon. "He was simply returned to his homeland, where he was called to face charges of treason against his own Emperor."

"His own…?"

"Kei Engai was my father," Kinka continued, without turning around. "The Emperor that put him to death was Ouba-hime's father, Heiboutei-heika of the West."

"Your father?" Aoiketsu's eyes widened, and Kinka nodded.

"As the child of a man like that, I had no prospects or future in Sairou," she said quietly. "By Western law, I was debarred from inheriting my father's lands, which were seized in full by the crown. I could have been killed, too, but I was fortunate. My mother's cousin Rouhei took me in, and protected me from any backlash. He was the one who suggested that I enter Ouba-hime's service, and the Empress Rie took pity on my situation, so she persuaded the Emperor to agree. Since then, I have owed them everything I have. And I would sooner die than betray them in the way my father did."

"I see," Aoiketsu pursed his lips. "So it means so much to you to protect Ouba-hime because you feel like, in some way, you're clearing the stains on your family's reputation? That somehow, by doing this, you can put right the wrongs your father committed and prove that not all of your kin are of traitor's blood?"

"Something like that, though I am genuinely fond of the Princess, too," Kinka grinned, nodding her head.

"Then we are even more alike than I realised," Aoiketsu observed.

"How so?" Kinka raised an eyebrow, and Aoiketsu offered her a wry smile.

"My father was not Kaiga Gin, but Nakago, the former Shougun of Kutou," he said frankly. "I am Kaiga Aoiketsu for form's sake only, not because it is true. My mother took a gamble and chose to betray her husband in the hope that it would help to bring about a better Kutou. She died when I was born, and for a long time, I didn't know anything about it — I only knew that I had been raised according to her dying

wishes, to fight for the East in everything I did. But when I discovered it — that my birth father was the man who had caused so many people so much suffering — I felt I had a debt to repay. And I submitted my sword after the last battle because I don't want to follow in his footsteps. I am my Emperor's man, just as you are loyal to Princess Ouba. Like you, I owe him my life. And nothing would ever compel me to betray him."

"*Nakago*'s son?" Kinka stared. "Are you telling me the truth? You are the son of a Stellar Warrior?"

"Yes," Aoiketsu nodded. "Just like Reizeitei-sama and Hikari both are."

"I see," Kinka's brows knitted together. "Well, then that explains your Western eyes. Your Nakago was a Hin, wasn't he? A tribe from Sairou, originally. You have Western blood — in which case, maybe I can trust you."

"Where someone comes from doesn't decide whether or not you can trust them," Aoiketsu reflected. "Now you've decided that, maybe you'll trust my map-reading skills? The truth is that there are no safe paths. As you said, rogues operate everywhere and some parts of Kusou-ken are still very poor, with pockets of desperate thieves lurking in the shadows waiting to rob unsuspecting passers by. The Emperor cannot reach everywhere at once — even Reizeitei-sama can't guarantee food in the mouths of every person, no matter how hard he tries to improve the standard of living across Kounan. Kusou-ken suffered the worst in the past conflicts between Kutou and Kounan, and it's some distance from Eiyou, which means that it's harder to convince the people there that they can trust in anything coming over the Eastern border. Plus, we'll have to cross into Seisen, which has a turbulent history with Kutou and with my Father in particular. But even despite those things, it's the best route to take. And besides, I know the military officials stationed in the Southern region of Kutou. If we pass into that area, we can get a message to court quickly and know that it will be delivered exactly as it should be. Hyoushin-sama is the one who gave me the order to accompany you, so he will be waiting for that communication and it will make things much smoother."

"Hyoushin," Kinka murmured. "You said that name before, didn't you? The name… of Kintsusei-sama's current Shougun, correct?"

"Yes," Aoiketsu agreed.

"The Meihi?"

“That’s right.”

“I see.” Kinka’s eyes narrowed as she digested this. “A powerful man indeed, then.”

“Without doubt,” Aoiketsu nodded. “He’ll make sure that, once we’re in the Eastern lands, we have all the protection we need on the trip to the capital.”

He smiled.

“I was trained in swordsmanship by Hyoushin-sama, and in some ways he’s the closest thing I’ve ever had to a father figure,” he added. “I trust him, and you should, too.”

“I will be interested to meet him,” Kinka admitted. “I’ve heard so many stories about this Meihi Shougun and his close rapport with the Emperor of Kutou.”

She sighed.

“I wish this journey was already over,” she added. “I don’t feel that Ouba-hime is in any danger here, at Reizeitei-sama’s court. Everything in Kounan is as Nefuru-oujisama anticipated it would be, . Reizeitei-sama is truly Heiboutei-heika’s close political ally and as shrewd a man as his reputation suggests. But once we leave… once we leave…”

“You have a premonition of bad fortune?” Aoiketsu asked softly, and Kinka shrugged.

“I’m not given to those things,” she owned. “Although the man who I now call guardian is Sairou’s court astrologer, so I have some vague knowledge of star patterns and how to read their movements in the sky. Not enough to draw any kind of convincing forecast, however. I was never good enough to do that. It’s just…”

She trailed off, shaking her head as if to clear it.

“I suppose that the sooner we reach Shunhou the better,” she said finally. “That’s all.”

“I share that sentiment,” Aoiketsu admitted. “I’m not a fan of predictions of any nature — believe me, past experience has taught me that it’s better not to know what fate has in store for you, because the chance of you changing it is slim indeed. I’ve seen enough people struggle to try and change their future yet without success — all knowing about it does is bring you suffering. At least, so long as you’re a person from this world.”

His gaze darted out across the gardens, to where Ouba and Hikari

were deep in conversation about something.

“Maybe the laws of fate bind even her, now,” he added. “Now she’s part of our world for good, perhaps she’s tied into the same rules as everyone else. But Hikari’s the only person I’ve ever known to have the power to change destinies.”

“I don’t think anyone can see exactly what their future holds,” Kinka shook her head. “Stars can be wrong, and even if they’re right, it’s up to the person interpreting them to know what it means. Besides, individuals have choices, too. Even if something is written in the skies, it doesn’t mean it has to come true. If a person chooses to do something, or not to do it, then that’s up to them. My father chose to be a traitor and pursue his own ambitions. I choose to be loyal and protect my Princess from harm. Those are judgements we made as people. They weren’t forced into us by some greater power. We’re all responsible for our own actions — successes and failures alike.”

“When we get to Kutou, you’ll have to discuss that with Myoume,” Aoiketsu’s lips twitched into a wry smile. “I think she might just disagree.”

“Who or what is Myoume?” Kinka frowned. “Why would she care?”

“Myoume is Hyoushin-sama’s wife,” Aoiketsu responded. “But more importantly, she’s a Westerner, like you. She’s the friend that Hikari is so keen to go and visit — and more than that, she carries the mark of Byakko on her finger. She’s Toroki — the prophet of the West.”

Kinka paled, staring at him in alarm.

“Byakko’s…” she whispered, and Aoiketsu frowned, concern crossing his expression at her sudden reaction.

“Kinka-dono? Are you all right? You’ve gone white.”

“Did you say… *Byakko’s* Toroki?” Kinka demanded. “A person at the Eastern court who is marked with one of the Tiger’s stellar symbols?”

“Yes,” Aoiketsu agreed. “She was guardian of his Shinzahou until Hikari came to this world — and now her duty is over, she’s settled in Kutou. In fact, I think that Kintsusei-sama hopes she’ll be some comfort for Ouba-hime when she first arrives — as compatriots, if nothing else.”

Kinka muttered a curse, spreading her hands out in front of her as she struggled to get her whirling thoughts into order.

“Byakko’s Toroki,” she muttered. “But… does that mean… all this

time…?"

"All this time?" Aoiketsu's brows knitted together. "Kinka-dono, what are you talking about? What's wrong with Myoume being Byakko's? Like I said, her duty ended when Byakko took his Shinzahou back and re-concealed it somewhere beyond this world's grasp. She's not dangerous. And I don't think she's seen the future since then — it's not like she goes around telling people things that are going to happen to them all the time. At least, not now, she doesn't."

Kinka slowly lowered her hands, clasping them together to stop them from trembling.

"Byakko's legend is supposed to be over," she said softly. "Kaiga-dono, please, give me your word that you won't mention this person to Ouba-hime? At least, not in terms of her stellar power. At the moment… it's something that Ouba-hime doesn't need to know. Especially with all the things already facing her — if she was to think that Byakko's people were reappearing all over the landscape…"

"I don't understand why you're so upset." Aoiketsu eyed her keenly. "I never met any of Seiryuu's Seishi, though I'd have liked to. I have met two of Suzaku's surviving ones, and I'd trust them both with my life — in fact, probably I have done, at some point or other. There's nothing to be afraid of. They're not enemies — far from it. They're born to save this world from destruction, so if the God calls them…"

"If the God calls them, it means danger is in the air," Kinka cut across him, her tones cold. "And if Ouba-hime thought that that was the case, she'd fret about the people she's left behind in Arudo. I can't let that happen, Kaiga-dono. I have my orders, from both Nefuru-oujisama and my guardian to see to it that the Princess reaches her destination safely. There is no question of us turning back, and I won't have her left to fret."

"I think you're taking things a little seriously, but if that's how you feel, I'll not interfere." Aoiketsu shrugged. "It's not my business. You'll soon see for yourself that Myoume's not someone you need to be afraid of. Although I suppose, if you've not met any Seishi before, I can understand why you'd be a little apprehensive. It's been a hundred years since Byakko's legend panned out, hasn't it? this time, I guess people in Sairou aren't used to the idea — whereas here and in the East, there are people who remember the battles with clarity."

"Sairou has peace, so there's no need for Byakko's people to be called," Kinka said flatly. "As you said, it's been a hundred years, and

Sairou has flourished in that time. As far as I'm concerned, that piece of Western history is long since over — and no good can come from trying to resurrect it."

"In which case, let's turn our attention back to the map, and focus on something more pressing," Aoiketsu suggested. "Then, at the very least, we can report to people later tonight exactly what path we plan on taking when we leave Eiyou in a couple of days."

"Agreed," Kinka nodded, relief flickering in her eyes. "Let's do that. I want to have it memorised, in any case — I don't want us to carry a map with us, in case of trouble. It's harder to extract information about someone's destination if there's nothing written down, ."

"Then we have work to do, if you're totally unfamiliar with this terrain," Aoiketsu said frankly. "And we shouldn't waste any more time talking about unimportant things. I doubt either of us are going to rest easy until we're safely riding through the gates of the Kutou Royal Palace — so we should put our heads together again and work on making that a smooth and swift reality."

"So, what exactly do you plan to do now, Kishayi?"

As Bakaru pushed back the curtain, stepping into the small back room, Kishayi swung around, staring at the tribe's elder with a guilty look on his pale features. He bit his lip, uncertain what to say, but from his companion's expression, he soon realised that it was obvious what the unspoken subject matter was.

Arina.

For a moment there was silence, then Bakaru sighed, shaking his head.

"You've disappointed me, you know," he said softly, and the gentle reproach in his words made Kishayi flinch, setting down the herbs he had been stripping.

"It's not my fault," he murmured. "I don't know how to talk to someone… from outside."

"No, you're too afraid to try," Bakaru admonished him. "Poor Arina now thinks that you've taken a hate at her, because you can't overcome your fears and prejudices."

"I don't know how to speak her language!" Kishayi protested. "I don't understand what she says, Bakaru. How can I try and talk to her when that's the case?"

“I thought she tried to teach you?”

“Yes… but…”

“But then something happened that you didn’t understand, and you did what you so often do.” Bakaru did not raise his voice, but Kishayi winced at the meaning in his elder’s tones. “You backed off, and fled for safer ground.”

He tut-tutted, shaking his head.

“I had hoped that I wouldn’t have to talk to you about this, but I think it’s got to a point where I have no choice,” he said heavily. “I hoped you would realise it on your own, and step forward without needing me to nudge you — but perhaps I hoped for too much. Still, you’re seventeen now. You’re too old to be treated as a child any longer… and I won’t have you acting like one, either. Not in my village.”

“Bakaru…?” Kishayi’s eyes widened with alarm, and Bakaru nodded.

“You are afraid of the world outside — we both know that,” he continued simply. “You have reason to be, in some respects. I know your mother’s story better than you, because I remember the tearful way in which she told it to me, with you clutched tightly in her arms as if she was afraid you’d be torn away. I remember how you struggled and fought for life despite the terrible time you’d both had and the odds against you ever taking a breath in the world. And I know the fate of your father and, probably, your brothers, too. It’s the same fate as befell my brother, and the family of many other people here. Given those tales, I understand why you’ve grown up with the fears you have. I think it would be hard for most children to ignore them.”

“Exactly,” Kishayi leant back against the wall, meeting his elder’s gaze with an earnest one of his own. “And it’s not like I have never been outside of the village. I went to Touran with Mother and Arina. I’m not as much of a coward as you think I am, you know.”

“Aren’t you?” Bakaru raised an eyebrow, and Kishayi felt his brief sense of defiance fading into nothing at the older man’s piercing gaze. “I don’t think you understand. You’ve taken nothing but fear from your mother’s stories, haven’t you, my boy? You heard the tales of your father’s death and your brothers’ being taken and you’ve immediately assumed that means people from outside are dangerous to get involved in. And even though you saved Arina’s life, in the end, those fears still drive you. Yet you don’t understand the other message

in Kaeli's experiences. My experiences. The pasts of all who fled here for sanctuary in the first place."

"What do you mean?" Kishayi's brows knitted together. "What message?"

Bakaru reached out to rest a hand on his shoulder, offering him a smile.

"The damage that prejudiced minds can cause, my boy," he said softly. "That's all."

Kishayi stared at him, stricken, and Bakaru nodded.

"By running frightened from all outside people, you taint them all with the same brush," he continued gently. "You assume that each and every person who is not Meihi must be a potential demon, waiting to enslave and torture you. But the world out there is not that world, and not everyone is that way. Have you forgotten the people in Sairou who saved your mother's life, helped deliver you safely into this world and gave you shelter when you had nowhere else to turn? What about all the people who assisted you on your journey to Koku-zan? I know you don't remember anything about that part of your life, but you have heard those stories as sure as you've heard the others. Not everyone who lives outside this place is evil. But there is no difference between the prejudices some of them hold against Meihi and the ones you are harbouring against them. Do you not realise, my boy, that what you are fostering inside your heart is the first seed of something that will grow and fester into suspicion, and eventually, hate?"

"Bakaru…" Kishayi could not look more dismayed. "I didn't… it's not… I don't hate them! I don't hate anyone, it's not like that! I just… I don't know how to communicate with people outside! I don't *understand* them! Yes, I'm scared of them — call me a coward if you like, because maybe it's what I am. But please, don't compare me to the people who killed my father and stole my brothers! I'm not like them! I'd *never* be like them!"

"They were all children once, the same as you," Bakaru responded gravely, his grip on the boy's shoulder's tightening as he looked him directly in the eyes. "Innocent mewling babes in arms, just as you were when you were first born. What they learnt from their parents probably dictated how they came to grow and act. You have learnt from being here the dangers of the outside world. I don't believe you're an evil person, my boy. I've never thought that. But you don't have to be an evil person to think evil thoughts or do evil things. We are Meihi, yes. We do not fight, no matter what the provocation might

be. But just because we are born Meihi does not mean we're not susceptible to the same emotions and drives as people who are not. We are not different from the people outside except in our appearances. And if you persist in dividing us in your mind, eventually it will reach a point from which you cannot return."

He smiled.

"You have had several opportunities to go to Touran, or to learn the language spoken there, but you have always refused," he added. "We've had people here before — rescued from the mountain — but you've always kept well out of their way. But this time, it's different. This time, *you* were the one to bring the stranded here. Weren't you?"

"Yes… but I couldn't leave her there! She'd have died, if I did!"

"Which is why we're having this conversation now, Kishayi," Bakaru told him firmly. "Even though you haven't said it, I'm sure that, for a brief moment, your heart wavered. For an instant you wondered whether it would be safer to leave the Outsider alone to die on the mountain, so she couldn't hurt your safe life here?"

Ice pierced through Kishayi's heart at this, and at the look in his eyes, Bakaru nodded his head.

"You see," he said softly. "You do not have to be evil to think of evil things."

Kishayi buried his head in his hands, and Bakaru patted him gently on the back.

"But you *did* save her, so it is not too late to break through that prejudice and stem your fear," he continued. "I hoped that Arina would be the one to do it, when you showed such attention to her when she first arrived. And I know that her magic book scared you — but it did not harm you, and you've had no reason to think that it would. Arina is not an enemy. She has no weapons, and she's not even from this world, let alone the places that enslaved your mother. She's a true stray — a world away from her family and everything she knows. She has many more reasons to be afraid than you — don't you think?"

Kishayi ran his fingers through his thick silver hair.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked at length. "It's not like I can go up to her and just have a conversation. I can say I'm sorry, but she won't understand me. And I can't understand her, either, so how am I supposed to even try?"

“I’m not going to tell you to do anything,” Bakaru told him soberly. “It’s not my job to order you to look after her, or befriend her in any way. It’s for your sake that I want you to find your own resolve in this matter. This is your chance to prove you are a man now, not a child. *And* that you are not polluted by a past you don’t even remember. Noone has ever hurt *you*, Kishayi. Noone has ever beaten or whipped you or chained you in irons. You should not act as though they have.”

Kishayi was silent for a moment, digesting this. Then he nodded his head.

“I *am* scared,” he admitted. “Arina is *not* like us. And I did think it… on the mountain. That maybe I shouldn’t help her. But I knew I had to. I knew I could never hold my head up as a Meihi if I didn’t, even though noone would ever have known about it. You’re right. I hadn’t thought about it like that, but if I had let her die there, because of my fears, I would’ve been doing something as bad as the people who hate us because we’re Meihi. Wouldn’t I?”

“I’m glad you can see that,” Bakaru agreed. “And as I said, it isn’t too late for you to change your perspective.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Arina is upset that you’re upset and avoiding her,” he added. “She’s lonely and she admitted earlier that she’s feeling homesick. She almost set herself on fire because of it, too — the reason she’s here with burns on her hand is partly because she’s been neglected and she feels left out. Even though you don’t speak the same language, Kishayi, she was happier when you were spending time with her. And I thought you were happy about it, too.”

“It was that book,” Kishayi owned. “The magic book. It glowed when I made to touch it, and I didn’t understand why.”

“I don’t understand it, either,” Bakaru acknowledged. “Not entirely, although I have been thinking about it very carefully since. The only thing I’m sure of at the moment is that Arina is stranded in this world and you were the one that rescued her. I don’t think things like that happen by coincidence. Its a sign that it’s time to face your fears and look after that girl. Let her teach you about her world and her language, and you teach her about ours. When you get stuck, your mother and I are there to translate or advise. But it has to come from *you*, Kishayi. You have to decide for yourself. Arina will leave here in a week or two, . You have to find your own resolve about what to do.”

Kishayi frowned, digesting this carefully. Then he nodded.

“I asked her to come with me to my copse, the other day,” he said at length. “I should keep my promise, that’s what Meihi do.”

“Good boy,” Bakaru chuckled, nodding his head. “Do you want me to convey the message, or can you do it yourself?”

“I’ll try,” Kishayi glanced back at the table of half-stripped herbs, scooping a couple of them up in his hands. “If Mikoyi-sensei will let me leave here early, I’ll try now. I don’t want to be a coward, Bakaru. And I don’t want to be in a situation where I’m thinking things as horrible as that. Arina isn’t anything to do with slaves.”

“And nor are you, Kishayi. Nor are you,” Bakaru reminded him. “Let those scars die with the generation before, all right? Don’t let them shackle you too.”

“I’ll try not to.” Despite himself, Kishayi returned the smile with a rueful grin of his own. “Thank you, Bakaru-san. I think… you’ve said things I need to think about. A lot. And I intend to do that. I promise.”

“Then I’ve no longer anything to disappoint me,” Bakaru winked at him, and Kishayi felt his resolve strengthen inside of him. Clasping the herbs more tightly in his hands, he pushed back the fabric divide, stepping into the workshop once more.

Arina was about to leave as he entered, but at the sight of him she paused, eying him uncertainly.

“Kishayi-kun?”

Kishayi faltered for a moment, meeting Mikoyi’s gaze, and the physician smiled, gesturing to him to go ahead. Kishayi nodded, then stepped forward, holding out the herbs as he did so.

“Will you come with me, to my copse?” he asked slowly, as she stared at him in clear confusion. “I promised to take you and I want to keep my word.”

Arina frowned, and Kishayi stretched out his arm to touch her unburned hand, placing the herb stems gently across her palm. He eyed her for a moment, then pointed to her, back to himself, and then to the herbs. He smiled, gesturing to the door beyond, and Arina’s eyes widened in sudden comprehension. She said something, glancing at the stems in her hand, and then clutching them firmly as she nodded her head. At the glimmer of hope in her expression, Kishayi felt something clench inside of him and inwardly he berated himself for having been so blind. It was as Bakaru had said, he realised. The girl had felt his avoidance more deeply than he’d seen, and he chastised himself firmly for forgetting that behind her different

appearance beat the same kind of heart as pounded now inside his own chest.

It had been that which had compelled him to save her, he remembered. Her pulse, beating gently against his touch.

He brushed his finger against the herbs.

“Herahisa.” he said clearly, and Arina glanced up.

“Hera… hisa?” she repeated softly, and Kishayi nodded. Carefully and self-consciously he slipped his hand around her wrist, leading her out into the cold village beyond. All the time he was aware that his mentor and the village elder were both watching them, and so, he imagined, were many of the other village residents as he took their unusual guest along the frozen trackway towards the boundary that led to the forestland beyond. Yet somehow the unsettled feeling he had had for the past two days had begun to fade now he was once more alongside her. In some way, he reflected, it was as though being in Arina’s company made him less afraid of the outside world and all the dangers that lurked there. Arina was not Meihi, but she was also not an enemy. And maybe, even if they could only speak through gestures and pictures, he could try to call her friend.

It was not till they reached the edges of the woodland that Arina spoke again, resting her hand briefly on the trunk of a tree as she glanced at him questioningly. For a moment Kishayi frowned, then, as he registered her question, light dawned in his beautiful amethyst eyes.

“Shahi,” he said softly, running his finger up and down the tree’s raggedy bark as if to emphasise his meaning. Arina frowned, as if committing it to memory.

“Sha… hi,” she murmured, her pronunciation making the word sound strangely foreign to his ears. Then, “Tree.”

She patted the trunk hard.

“Tree.”

“T..ree?” Kishayi echoed, and Arina nodded, a grin touching her lips. Despite himself, Kishayi found he was returning her enthusiasm, as he realised they had begun once again the show and tell language lesson they had so abruptly abandoned two days earlier.

True, it was only the most basic form of communication. But it was communication of a sort at the very least. And suddenly Kishayi realised that he truly *wanted* to communicate with her — that more

than anything he wanted to understand the things this strange waif had to say.

As this thought crossed his mind, he felt a warmth buzz through him and he faltered, uncertain as to how to interpret the sudden sensation of security and belonging that had begun to penetrate his senses. It was unlike anything he had ever felt before, and he glanced at her, squeezing her wrist gently as he realised she was the source of that sensation.

They could not speak the same language, and yet somehow, out here in the snow, they had formed a bond.

He gestured up ahead, running his fingers along the branches of the trees as he pushed each one back out of the way to create a pathway through.

“Be careful.” He instructed, and though Arina could not understand his words, she seemed to read his meaning, for she ducked beneath the branch, following his footsteps exactly as they headed deeper and deeper into the greenery. As they did so, the sky above them began to disappear in a mottled covering of green-flecked branches and, as they arrived at the core, Arina let out an exclamation, bending down to touch the petals of a bravely blooming flower.

Kishayi smiled, nodding his head.

“Lihna,” he said softly, squatting down on the ground and indicating the flower. “Lihna.”

“Lihna?” Arina grinned, then, “Flower. Flower, Kishayi-kun.”

“Flo..wer,” Kishayi repeated the unfamiliar word, committing it to memory. Then he ran his fingers underneath the half-opening blossom, coaxing the petals gently into a full and vivid bloom. Arina gasped, staring in disbelief as, slowly but surely the flower opened, raising its head to greet the tiny slivers of light that gleamed through overhead.

The Meihi word was not dissimilar to her name, Kishayi realised, as deftly and cleanly he severed the flower from the main body of the plant, holding it out to his companion. Carefully she took it, then, with a self-conscious smile, she reached up to tuck it into the dark waves of her hair. The contrast of the vivid mountain blue against the ebony of her curls reminded Kishayi of the brief months when lower slopes of Koku-zan thawed and revealed the true colour of the rock beneath. At these more summery times, the blue mountain blossoms could be found dotted here, there and everywhere, and the image

made him smile.

Slowly he bowed his head towards her.

“I’m sorry that I’ve made you feel left out,” he said sincerely. “I’m a coward, and I didn’t mean to upset you. But I won’t do it any more. I promise. So long as you’re here, Arina, I’ll look after you, however I can, and even if it’s hard for us to talk to one another. I’m not going to be afraid of you… I know you’re not here to hurt me. Even if there are things about you I don’t understand — I think I’d like to learn. And even though, right now, you don’t understand me… maybe somehow I’ll find a way to explain this to you without having to do it through someone else. Because I’d like to tell you, face to face. And I’d like you to tell me too, about your world.”

At the sudden stream of soft, gentle Meihi, Arina looked startled, then she reached out to rest her hand on his shoulder. She said something, then got to her feet, moving across to explore the rest of the small copse.

Her response had been brief, Kishayi realised, but somehow he knew that he had been forgiven.

“I’m glad I saved her,” he decided, as he watched her examine each unfamiliar plant with the curiosity of a small child. “Bakaru was right. If I hadn’t, I would have been a poor excuse for a human being, let alone a Meihi. It *is* time I faced this fear, and I haven’t liked being at odds with her these past two days. I don’t understand it, yet, but I feel like I was meant to save her. That it was because she was there that I was drawn here at that time even though there was a blizzard drawing in. I was meant to save Arina, and maybe, I was meant to learn from her. So I will. If I can, I will.”

He glanced up at the heavy tree branches, squinting through at the brief snatches of sky overhead.

“If that’s what you want for me, Bali-sama, then that’s what I intend to do.”

Chapter 12

Chapter Eleven

Well, that was the last of them.

Nefuru set aside the document with a sigh, placing his brush carefully in its carved holder and stretching his hands out in front of him as if to relax their stiffening muscles. It had been a long morning, and with the court exams pending, he had had far more to go through than usual. His father was, he knew, closeted with his advisors at that moment, discussing the best way in which to ensure safety in Arudo's streets once the high-pressure examination period began, and normally he too would have been involved, eager to discover who among this year's entrants were rumoured to have a future within Sairou's government. One day, , this would be his government, and the ministers who now reported to Heiboutei would then report to him and him alone, expecting him to be the final word in all decisions of magnitude.

But this year, he had no interest in the sudden influx of people that had begun to swell the city's numbers to bursting point. With Rouhei's cryptic stellar readings and Kinka's words about Byakko's sign, the Prince found himself feeling decidedly uneasy.

"Rouhei spoke as though he didn't think we were talking about a man-based rebellion of some sort, or riots in the city, which is what my Father is working so hard to prevent," he muttered. "That means it's something else. I wish I could doubt Rouhei's accuracy, but dammit, he's the best astrologer this court has had in generations. His calls are usually not too far off the mark."

He got to his feet, pacing restlessly across the floor as he considered the direction in which his thoughts were heading.

Rouhei was the best astrologer at Sairou's court… since the days when the man in the shadows had been the stellar warrior Amefuri, a hundred years earlier.

"The man who slew my great grandmother in cold blood," he said frankly, the words seeming heavy in the solitude of his study. "Nishi no Kage. Han Daiyu."

Almost as soon as the man's name had passed his lips, a cold breeze seemed to whip through the chamber, teasing at his long tail of dark

hair and chilling right through his fine clothing to his very bones. Instinctively he shivered, wrapping his arms around his body as if somehow he could protect himself from the ill omen. It was not the done thing at court to speak the man's name any more than it was done to discuss the deeds of the Empress Makiko — yet the more he thought about it, the more Nefuru was sure that Rouhei's evasive references to the current situation had some direct connection with that concealed, bloody past that his kin and the Han-ke had buried between them for more than a hundred years.

A knock at the door drew him back to himself, and he raised his voice to call the visitor in, secretly glad of the intrusion. Though, like all of his family, he knew the story as it had been passed down from his Grandfather, he knew that too few generations had passed for him to be able to dissassociate himself from it completely. The witch's blood ran through his veins, and the killer's surged through Rouhei's. It was an unavoidable truth that both bonded and divided them as allies and friends, and no matter how much he tried to rationalise it, Nefuru knew that it was still a source of unease whenever the memory crossed his mind.

The door swung back to reveal a messenger, who bowed low before him, holding out a small, carved chest.

"A message, my Lord, from Kounan's court," he said, as Nefuru crossed the floor towards him. "It bears the seal of the Lady Ouba."

"Ouba?" Nefuru's eyes widened, and he grasped the box up in his hands, his worries momentarily forgotten as he hurriedly pried it open. "We'd received word, of course, that she'd arrived in the south in safety. But I didn't expect her to send a message herself."

He nodded at the messenger.

"Thank you. You are dismissed."

"Yes, sir," The messenger bowed once more, then withdrew, pulling the door across behind him, and Nefuru pulled the lid off the box, setting it down on the desk as he extracted the scroll inside. As he unrolled it, he realised that it was not long, but it was indeed written in the distinctive, formal hand of his younger sister, and despite himself he felt a twinge of relief touch his heart.

The reports had been true, then. Ouba was indeed safe and sound in Kounan, at the court of his father's closest ally, Reizeitei of the South.

He sank down in his chair, running his gaze down the columns of

precise, pretty kanji as he absorbed her message carefully.

"*Oniisama,* [he read]

I hope you will forgive me the brevity and informality of this communication, but with the preparations for our continuing journey, I have had little time to compose anything more appropriate. Kinka told me that it would not be considered rude if I did not write to you until we reached Shunhou, but I felt that I wanted to let you know in my own words that I am safely arrived in Eiyou and that, despite the obvious weariness the journey has brought, I am in good health. Suzaku's Emperor is everything that rumour paints him — gracious and well-mannered, with hospitality that even a fussy individual such as myself has been unable to fault. I have truly felt glad of this short break, my brother, to rally myself before continuing East.

We are being joined in our journey by Kintsusei-sama's envoy to Suzaku's court, Kaiga Aoiketsu-dono. He carries a noble name with which you may indeed be familiar, but he does not seem associated with any aristocratic house and I believe he was born illegitimate. Kinka believes this is a good thing, because it means he has no material interests of his own to sway his loyalties and will carry his Emperor's instructions out to the letter. He also appears to be skilled in map-reading, and I have confidence that when our travelling re-begins, we will be in safe hands. He seems a kind man, and someone of whose integrity you would approve. He speaks well of Kintsusei-sama, also — which reassures me somewhat, since he has been in the Kutou Emperor's service since he was very young indeed and seems well placed to know what kind of a man it is I am going to wed.

One other is also joining our party, which you may find strange, yet you must know that it is a second source of comfort to me that it is so. You may have heard already of the lady of Kounan's court, Hikari-hime, whom the Emperor himself refers to as 'sister'. She is not, of course, his sister by blood, yet she is very highly thought of here, and said to be gifted with the divine magic of the Phoenix God himself in some way that I confess I do not fully understand. She called it 'Shinzahou', though I do not truly know what that is, and I have heard from more than one source that she was the one who assumed the mantle of Miko when the East was saved from its demons eighteen months ago. Whatever the truth is, I can say that all of Suzaku's court revere her as though she was a true branch of the divine Royal House, and from what I have heard about her achievements I imagine it will make you happy to know that I have someone so powerful to call an ally on my trip East.

For my part, I feel I have found a true friend in Hikari, for she too has been separated from her loved ones and understands what it is I go to do. It appears she also has friends in Kutou, and therefore has good reason to travel the rest of the way with us. The court rumours say she has spiritual power enough to fight off a thousand bandits, but if I am to be truthful, I am truly just happy to have someone else alongside me when I enter Shunhou. Kinka is loyal as ever, and Sayo has been as diligent as you would want him to be, my brother. But I depend on them horribly, and it makes me feel ashamed.

Still, I carry the pride of the family with me, and I will not falter. These few days in Suzaku's land have made me realise one thing — that my path ahead is a clear one, and I will not falter from my duty in walking it. You need not worry about me in any regard, Oniisama. I will not let you or Father down. Send Sashi and my nephew all the love in the world, and tell them that when I am safely in Kutou, I will be sure to write to them as well as to you, to tell them my impressions of my new home. Till then, may Byakko bless us all.

Ouba."

"Ouba-chan."

Slowly Nefuru lowered the letter, his gaze softening as he pictured his sister in his mind's eye. "Though I know you'd never tell me if your heart was breaking with homesickness, I'm still relieved somewhat to hear from you. And in such terms, too. So long as you have your resolve, it seems that you will be far away if danger infiltrates the West. And so much to the good."

He re-rolled the scroll, placing it back in the box.

"And if Kinka is the one who bears Byakko's mark, then you have protection enough indeed," he acknowledged. "I know little about this 'Hikari-hime', and less about this 'Kaiga Aoiketsu', although the name Kaiga is known to me. Still, if you believe them allies, and Kinka does also, I will judge them so as well. You may be naive, Ouba-chan, but you have never yet befriended one who would come to be your enemy."

"Nefuru?"

At that moment a voice from the doorway startled him and he turned, meeting the questioning glance of his wife.

"Is it true that you've had a letter from Ouba?" Sashi asked softly, and Nefuru nodded, gesturing for her to enter.

"In her own hand, and with good news," he agreed. "You have no

idea how much relief it is to read her words, even if she is being brave about her circumstances. You may read it if you like, Sashi. It's nothing that should be kept between sister and brother."

"I'd be happy to, if you don't mind," Sashi nodded, stepping gracefully across the chamber to the desk. She reached for the letter, then paused, gazing up at him with uncharacteristic eyes.

"Nefuru, are you still certain that Ouba is safest away from Arudo?"

"Yes, at the moment, I am," Nefuru sighed. "Why? Do you think she should be brought back here?"

"No." Sashi pursed her lips. "It isn't that. I just think there's so much uncertainty and I don't like it. And all this talk about Byakko makes me uneasy."

"Uneasy?" Nefuru frowned. "Because it means that, if Rouhei is right, we might all be facing disaster?"

Sashi did not answer at once, then she shook her head.

"Rouhei is a smart individual," she said carefully. "But he isn't spiritual, Nefuru. He could yet be wrong."

"Wrong?" Nefuru looked startled. "Even despite the conversation you and I had the other day…? Sashi — has something happened to change your mind?"

"Perhaps," Sashi sighed, sinking down into an empty seat as she toyed idly with the scroll, passing it from hand to hand. "The truth is, the other night, I had a premonition of something. You'll mock me, as you've done before, but I truly believe it was Kitora's spirit who came to me, warning me about the danger of falling into the demon's trap. And Nefuru, before you speak, I took seriously the things she said to me. Because I think they are true."

"Sashi, Kitora is an entity whose appearance is unknown, if she even has one," Nefuru said gently. "And yes, I know your faith is strong, but when it comes to visions…"

"Kitora told me that, a hundred years ago, a witch was slain in this palace," Sashi cut across him, eying him earnestly. "A witch by the name of Makiko, a Princess from the East who tried to spread a foreign faith across this land. But she failed, and was cut down by a man who called himself the Shadow of the West."

"What has that to do with anything?" Nefuru stared at her. "That's ancient history."

“The Empress Makiko was your Great Grandmother, who came from Kutou in a political deal not dissimilar to the one which has sent Ouba East.” Sashi’s voice was little more than a whisper. “It was hoped she would forge bonds between the two countries, but instead she was not trusted. The Emperor became ill, and in the ensuing chaos, people laid the blame at her door. War broke out in Sairou, and the Eastern Army sent fleets of ships to Kaidou and Shifu in order to bring order about by force. Then, by a blade from the shadows, the Empress was killed. In the same instant, the Emperor Meishitei died.”

Her hands tensed slightly, and she clasped them together, her grasp so tight that her already pale knuckles became white.

“They say Makiko-sama was slain by an anonymous assassin known only by the nickname Nishi no Kage, but some people say her son ordered her murder himself,” she added, her voice trembling. “That his council forced him to be rid of her, and so he buckled and did as they asked.”

Despite himself, Nefuru whitened.

“How do you know all these things?” he demanded. “I’ve never spoken to you about Makiko’s legend — some of the things you’ve just said are sworn secrets between blood members of my family only, passed from Emperor to heir!”

“The story goes that the Empress’s vengeful spirit entered into a pact with the deity she worshipped and so she existed beyond death,” Sashi continued, taking no notice of her husband’s words. “She placed a curse on Byakko and his people at the moment she drew her last breath. And she was sealed inside a cave within the Kanin mountains by Byakko’s warriors, in a place where the stars shine even within the darkness of Kumo-zan itself. Kitora warned me that a spirit who is trapped and left to hate for that long may become a true demon, and if freed, could cause mayhem across Sairou’s land.”

“Sashi, *stop* it!” Nefuru’s grip on his wife’s shoulder’s tightened, alarm flaring in his expression. “Stop saying these things — these are forbidden subjects that even my Father and I don’t discuss between ourselves! To speak about them so freely… even before me…”

“Kitora is Byakko’s, therefore she knows, and is beyond any Earthly judgement,” Sashi said evenly. “She told me all these things, and by your face I can tell they’re true.”

“Even *I* don’t know if everything you said is true,” Nefuru bit his lip. “It’s not a subject that’s talked about.”

“Kitora told me one other thing, too.” Sashi raised earnest eyes to her husband’s. “She told me Nishi no Kage’s true identity. She said his name was Han Daiyu — and that he was also the man born as Amefuri of Byakko.”

“Sashi…” Nefuru faltered. Then he sighed, rubbing his temples.

“I can count the number of people alive who know the identity of Nishi no Kage on the fingers of one hand,” he said softly. “My Father, Rouhei, the current Han-ke Lord… myself. No others know the thing you’ve just told me, Sashi. No other living person knows with any certainty that Han Daiyu was Nishi no Kage, or that he was so alongside being Amefuri. Not even Ouba.”

“Then you *have* to believe what I say is true, don’t you?” Sashi’s eyes lit up. “Kitora came to me because she knew that of all people here, I’d listen. Nefuru, you *must* trust me. She told me all of this so that you would — so that you’d know that it was the truth. I’m afraid that what Rouhei’s seen in the sky isn’t Byakko’s return at all, but an imitation — a false God created by this demon witch and sent to throw us all into confusion. , Byakko has been summoned. Peace has been brought to Sairou. What purpose could there be in any of his people being called to arms again? It makes no sense, no matter how I think of it. And when I had the dream… it was so vivid, Nefuru. So vivid… as though she really wanted me to know that we’re the only ones who can stop the West falling into Makiko’s trap.”

“Sashi…” Nefuru bit his lip, reaching across to wipe away the tears that glistened on his wife’s lashes. “Have you discussed this with anyone else?”

“Rairi.” Sashi admitted. “Though not in as much detail as I have done with you, of course. I just wanted another opinion about Kitora’s word, and she is discreet. She has never shared a secret of mine yet. There is also one other, Nefuru. I… I’m afraid I’ve done something else.”

“Something else?” Nefuru frowned, and Sashi dropped her gaze.

“I took my own initiative and summoned Zarin to my chambers,” she admitted softly. “I told him… I sent him and some of my Guard out into Sairou’s countryside to try and track down these fake people of Byakko and bring them back to Arudo. I thought it best to act, but in hindsight, I maybe should have discussed it with you first. So I… I’m discussing it with you now. I made it clear to Zarin that they were to be taken alive — they may, , be innocent people possessed by the demon’s curse. But for our son’s sake, I couldn’t *not* do anything. I had

to act… because I trust that what Kitora told me is the truth."

"*Sashi*?!" Nefuru's eyes widened and he grasped his wife's shoulders loosely between his fingers, pulling her around to face him. "Why didn't you come to me if you were thinking along such lines as that? You must know that releasing your Guard on any kind of private mission — even one where you have considerable justification for doing so — is something that has to be cleared through proper channels first! I thought you were more careful than that — what possessed you?"

"Kitora's spirit, perhaps," Sashi said frankly. "But I was worried, Nefuru. For one of Byakko's servants to come to me like that…"

"You have no reason to believe she did any such thing," Nefuru reminded her. "At least, you may have your own conviction, but Sashi, this is Arudo and the Imperial Court. Most people here do not share the spiritual senses you do — do you think that, if my Father was to start wondering why Zarin was traipsing around the countryside, that you could quell his concerns by talking about spirits and night visions? You know that won't do. I really thought you had more sense than to act without at least discussing it first."

"I'm not mad, or making it up," Sashi pulled away from his grip, glaring at him with reproachful ebony eyes. "If I was, how could I know those things about Princess Makiko? You said yourself that they were restricted… certainly something that someone like me could not gain access to very easily. But Kitora could know. Kitora *would* know. Especially about Amefuri. Wouldn't she?"

Nefuru sighed, slowly shaking his head.

"I didn't say you were mad or that it was an invention on your part," he said slowly. "Just that it wouldn't stand up as proof where my Father was concerned."

"Don't *you* even believe me?" Sashi looked hurt, and Nefuru shrugged.

"I don't know whether I believe in Kitora or not," he admitted. "Still, I don't think you're lying to me. I know you believe it. And it is true that you wouldn't be able to access the restricted records even if you could get into the locked area of the Archives in some way. Most of the documents there are written in an ancient encryption passed down through the Royal Line since Sairou came into existence. Only my blood family and a few, select members of the Han-ke have ever been educated in how to read it."

“Exactly,” Sashi said triumphantly. “So there is no other way, is there?”

“All right,” Nefuru held up his hands. “If Father asks me about Zarin, I’ll tell him that it was with my knowledge and consent that you dispatched him. But really, Sashi…”

“I believe what she told me,” Sashi said frankly. “I did what I thought was best to protect my son and my husband from harm.”

“Fortunately Zarin is a level-headed captain and unlikely to start wilfully slaughtering individuals without due cause,” Nefuru sighed. “And I suppose it won’t do any harm to have them brought back here and asked questions regarding their motives or their sincerity. *If* they exist, of course. At the moment we have only Kinka’s word and Rouhei’s theorising to go on. I haven’t even broached the situation with Father, yet. He’s been far too busy and I’d rather have something firm before I do.”

“Kinka,” Sashi pursed her lips. “She was the one who told you, wasn’t she, that she’d seen Byakko’s mark?”

“Yes,” Nefuru agreed. He frowned. “Come to think of it, you suggested that she might even *be* the one in question, didn’t you? Since Rouhei’s gone so far to protect her up till now. Do you still think that, if this vision of yours is the truth?”

“Kei Kinka as one of Byakko’s blessed, huh?” Sashi’s eyes narrowed. “It’s a pity. She’s left the court — from this distance I wouldn’t be able to tell.”

“Pardon?” Nefuru stared at her. “Tell? Tell what? I don’t understand.”

“Whether she is or she isn’t, of course,” Sashi laughed. “Really, you know, your spiritual ineptitude makes you blind as can be sometimes, Nefuru. If I’d had a chance before she left here to really analyse her chi, no doubt I would have discovered whether or not there was anything unusual about her spirit. As it was, I didn’t really pay much attention. It didn’t seem to matter, before.”

“You’re in a strange mood this morning,” Nefuru reflected, cupping his wife’s face in his hands as he gazed down into her jet black eyes. “You’ve never been so dismissive or so clinical where Kinka was concerned before… in fact, I was of the impression you were quite on her side. I’m sure I remember you saying that you can’t judge the daughter on the father’s sins.”

“Did I?” Sashi looked surprised for a moment, then she shrugged.

“Perhaps I did. But that was before all of this began, Nefuru. I’m not being clinical or dismissive — but had you forgotten that you’ve entrusted your sister’s safety to this girl? If she’s the only one who knows anything concrete about the so-called return of Byakko’s people, she’s either involved or a target for those who are. And neither one makes her safe company for your sister to be in.”

Despite himself, Nefuru paled.

“You think Ouba’s still at risk, even though she’s no longer here?”

“I think we need to know what’s going on, which is why I dispatched Zarin,” Sashi said firmly. “If there are people out there claiming to belong to Byakko, well then we’ll meet them and see what they have to say. When you think it through, my idea is a sane one — don’t you think so? And if it comes to it, it wouldn’t be hard to recall Kinka to the palace, would it? She wouldn’t question an order from the Emperor, or from his son.”

“I suppose she wouldn’t,” Nefuru sank down in his chair, resting his chin in his hands as he digested his wife’s words. “I wish I had your insight, sometimes, so I could understand what your feelings were and why you feel so strongly about this. Rouhei’s been studying the stars for a long time building up to this. He’s convinced their pattern means that Byakko will come again, and I don’t doubt his skill. Now you’re telling me that it’s all a hoax — that there’s no reason for Byakko’s people to come and that, by putting about the false rumour that they will, we might end up creating jeopardy for Sairou as opposed to preventing it. Certainly I can’t fault your reasoning that Byakko’s legend is over, and that we’ve been at peace for a century with nothing much to complain about in any regard. And Rouhei’s said himself that his star science isn’t an exact art and there’s leeway for error. But even so, Sashi, even so…”

“Rouhei is smart, but he’s as spiritually dead as you are,” Sashi pursed her lips, eying her husband pensively. “He only has his calculations to rely on, whereas I’m calling on the forces of something much greater. I’m not saying Rouhei’s lying, but that maybe his readings aren’t as precise as my intuition. His stars might easily mean that someone claiming to be Byakko no Miko is coming to Sairou. Whether or not he can differentiate between real and fake, I doubt. He has no spiritual senses at all — he can’t judge what he can’t see.”

“He’s said the same many times before,” Nefuru grimaced. “I know I’m little better. My family may be strong leaders, Sashi, but we’re not sorcerers and we have no ability that way. Probably it’s been like that since time began — either way, the Royal House of Sairou rules with

its wits, not with its intuition."

"I don't think that it's always been the case." Sashi moved over to the window, gazing absently out across the palace grounds. "I think that your Grandfather had your family sealed, in order to prevent them being attacked by demons and other dark spirits. I'm sure I've heard that Meishitei-sama and those who came before him used to see ghosts in their chambers, from time to time."

"Where did you hear that?" Nefuru stared at her, and Sashi shrugged her shoulders.

"Court rumour," she said dismissively. "You should open your ears a little more — maybe you'd learn something if you did."

"You know, sometimes I think you forget completely what positions we hold at this court." Nefuru smiled wryly, eying his wife ruefully as he did so. "I am the Crown Prince, Sashi. To open my ears to unsubstantiated rumour could be a dangerous thing indeed. I know you like your tidbits of information — but I'm not at liberty to chase them the same way you are."

"A pity,." Sashi sighed. "I think you'd find some of them interesting, if you did."

She turned back, meeting her companion's gaze.

"Nefuru, if Kitora's vision is true — as I believe it is — and Kinka *did* see Byakko's mark, what's to be done about it?" she asked softly. "If the person Rouhei has been protecting, believing them to be the genuine article — if that person is Kinka, and she's in fact an imposter, surely something must be done? Such a person may have been given strong spiritual powers by any invading demon spirit — surely to find out the truth behind that is the most important thing for us to do right at the moment?"

"I agree that it's time I spoke to Rouhei again, and this time, I hope, get a straight answer from him," Nefuru nodded. "But I won't believe that Kinka would willingly engage in treason against either myself or especially, against Ouba. She took the oath with the utmost sincerity and solemnity. More, I know that she was the one most betrayed by her father's actions. She knows what it means, to be a traitor. And she would not cross that line."

"The more I think on it, the more I disagree," Sashi shook her head. "Anyone can swear an oath they don't intend to keep. Did not Engai swear the same oath to your Lord Father when he came of age? And look what happened to him. Ambition is a cruel master and it lures

people in. Even those who seem beyond suspicion."

"It's true that Engai was Father's trusted friend before he became turned by his greed." Nefuru nodded. "But Kinka…"

"Kinka is a Kei, even if Rouhei considers her a Han," Sashi cut across him, shaking her head. "She is Engai's daughter, his blood runs through her veins and drives her heart to beat. And the Kei-ke are not like the Han-ke or the Ueke-ke, are they? Even if they've never held the same high position as the Han in the Emperor's trust, by blood they rank more highly. They are different in all respects from other noble houses, whether major, minor or those families who have been swallowed up by others . Kinka is the last one remaining of such a family — she must hold that weight very heavily in her heart."

"Kinka would have nothing if not for Rouhei or Mother's kindness," Nefuru objected. "Even if there was some desire inside of her to claim Kei lands and privileges, it would be impossible for her to succeed. The laws regarding inheritance and treason are older than most of the statutes in Sairou's legal library. Even Father could not change them without serious and heavy negotiations with the council, most of whom would not favour them being repealed. She has nothing to gain from rebellion. I think Kitora has turned your head, Sashi. You're seeing enemies in a place where enemies just cannot exist."

Sashi was silent for a moment, a flicker of annoyance crossing her dark gaze. It was gone in a moment, but Nefuru had seen it, and he frowned.

"Sashi?"

"The Kei-ke have a connection to the royal blood that Ueke-ke and Han-ke don't have," Sashi spoke in low tones, soft and reflective, yet carrying a faint edge that Nefuru had not heard there before. "Or am I mistaken, Nefuru, when I say that the younger sister of Lord Meishitei was once the Lady of the Kei manor?"

"I'm not denying it." Nefuru shook his head. "My Great Grandfather and the then Kei lord grew up together and fought side by side in battle — I believe Meishitei-sama may even have owed his life to the man, though I don't recall his name. For one of noble blood, who had such a close friendship with the Emperor, such a marriage would not be considered unusual."

He pursed his lips.

"I'm surprised, though, that you're aware of it. The Ueke and the Kei have never had much to do with one another, so far as I can

remember. No rivalries, no communications, nothing. This is ancient history, also — a century ago, in a world quite different to Sairou today in many, many ways. You've never bothered about that past before. Why would you care about it now?"

"A noble daughter *always* cares about the status of other noble daughters," Sashi said simply. "Kinka is that, even though she is disinherited from the Kei estate. She is the proper born daughter of Engai, who, in turn, is a direct descendant of the Princess Chukai and her Kei-born husband. Of all of Meishitei-sama's brothers and sisters, Chukai-hime alone shared full blood with him — the daughter of the favoured consort, just like yourself and Ouba. Any child born of that marriage could, in theory, claim they are descendants of the Royal House. And, as such, lay siege to the throne."

"Now you *are* being ridiculous," Nefuru snorted. "With Engai's bloodline debased through his treason, *noone* would support such a claim. Even if Engai's line had not been so debarred, the claim is a weak one, diluted by far too much noble blood. Sashi, I want you to stop this, now. We have no evidence whatsoever to even suspect treason is in the offing, let alone that Kinka is potentially about to carry it out. I know the girl, and more, *Rouhei* knows her. Rouhei may not be spiritually adept, but I trust him and his judgement with my life and have done so since we were young men. He will not let me down and nor will she… whatever Kinka saw, I'm sure, it doesn't mean she's become possessed by demons or has entered into any kind of rebel's pact in order to bring Sairou's government to its knees."

Sashi's body tensed for a moment, as if she was about to refute the point. Then she sighed, slowly nodding her head.

"You're right," she said sadly. "I… I'm overreacting, and I'm sorry. But the vision was so intense, Nefuru — it frightened me. That something like this could happen here… ever since I woke up, all I could think about is you or Shinju covered in blood, slain in front of me with me helpless to do anything about it. My charm magic is no match for any demon, I'm sure of that. If it came to it… how can I protect either of you, except through my words?"

"Sashi…" Nefuru's expression softened, and gently he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. "I'm sorry, too, since I'm being harsh. But we don't know anything, yet. And we can't act on something we don't know. It's just like dispatching Zarin — without hard evidence, we can't make moves. If we do, we might cause problems we really seek to avert."

Sashi raised a faint smile.

“That’s why you’re the Crown Prince, I suppose, and I’m just a foolish consort,” she murmured. “But it did frighten me, Nefuru. I don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to you.”

“Nothing is going to,” Nefuru assured her. “When Zarin comes back, I’ll debrief him myself and hear what he has to say. And if there is anything to follow up, I’ll follow it up — you have my word on that. But until I’ve talked to Rouhei, I’m not going to recall Kinka to Sairou’s court. I can’t believe that girl would betray Ouba, no matter what happened. Sayo is with them, in any case. Nothing will happen to my sister while he’s accompanying her.”

Satisfaction glimmered briefly in Sashi’s eyes, and she nodded her head.

“And I’ll read Ouba’s letter,” she responded, carefully slipping a well-manicured nail under the curl of the vellum as she slowly smoothed it out in front of her. “I’ll see how my favourite sister-in-law is feeling now she’s ensconced in the Southern Court.”

“Should I be jealous of the attention you seem to pay to this Southern Emperor and his manners?” Nefuru teased. “A Prince could become quite unsettled by his consort showing such unabashed interest in a foreign King’s good looks.”

Sashi opened her mouth to respond, but she faltered, her grip on the scroll tightening as she raised her gaze to her husband’s.

“Nefuru…” she breathed, excitement flaring into her ebony eyes as she clasped the parchment to her chest. “Is this true? Is what Ouba writes… really true?”

“Not being in Kounan, it’s hard to say, but I’d imagine so,” Nefuru’s brows knitted in confusion. “What’s the matter, Sashi? You’ve gone from having all the cares in the world on your shoulders to suddenly looking like you’ve stumbled on the secret of life.”

“Perhaps that’s what it is.” Sashi clutched her hands together to prevent their trembling, taking a deep breath as if struggling to contain her emotions. “But to think that Kounan would have such a thing… and that Ouba… that Ouba…”

“Would you not speak in riddles?” Nefuru tilted his head on one side, eying her quizzically. “I don’t speak hysterical female, and obviously my sister’s letter has some greater girlish meaning than I can fathom… a translation, if you please?”

“Oh, don’t be silly.” Sashi shook her head impatiently. “Don’t you understand? Ouba’s come across a Shinzahou… a treasure of the

Gods!”

“You’ve heard of that?” Nefuru asked, and Sashi nodded, rolling her eyes.

“Why do you not read the legends more, Nefuru?” she scolded. “The Shinzahou is a treasure a Priestess leaves behind when she goes back to her world. It’s a reliquary of a God’s power, left here to protect the people after the God is gone. Usually they are treasures — in the North, there are many stories about a necklace said to be charged with Genbu no Miko’s divine power. But to be in the form of a person… that such a thing was even possible, I had no clue!”

“Genbu no…?” Nefuru sighed, shaking his head. “What do you Funoki do in the Northern Province, Sashi? Pray to Kitora and listen for whispers of stories over the border? I don’t care whether or not any Miko left any divine treasures anywhere. There’s no such thing in Sairou, that’s all I’m aware of. If there was, it’d be at court. Since it isn’t, it mustn’t exist. And since Kounan is not Sairou, my interest in their Shinzahou is not great.”

“But the power these things can wield!”

“I’d rather power such as that was in the power of our allies, if that’s what you mean,” Nefuru responded simply. “Kounan are a nation both Father and I have faith in. Reizeitei-sama is the same solid kind of Emperor as his father before him — they of all people would not betray us, so there’s no reason to fear.”

“It’s said that the power of a Shinzahou is enough to raise a God,” Sashi whispered, her eyes glittering with anticipation. “I have no clue what kind of strength that translates to within a person, but this ‘Hikari-hime’ is obviously someone with tremendous spiritual strength.”

“The power to raise a God,” Nefuru’s eyes narrowed. “You mean to say that, if Sairou was to come under attack from this demon in some regard, we might call on our neighbours to the South for help? And if Ouba has befriended this Hikari-hime girl, she might offer her powers to assist if we should so need them?”

Sashi was silent for a moment. Then she nodded.

“The Shinzahou has that power,” she agreed brightly. “Now do you see? Ouba may have accidentally found the truest treasure of them all — the closest thing to a God’s power within the confines of this world!”

“Then it seems I have little reason to worry about my sister’s

safety," Nefuru's expression became one of relief. "If a Shinzahou is as powerful as you believe, and Ouba has managed to make an ally out of her."

"Without doubt." Sashi nodded. "Though from Kitora's words, I think the demon is only interested in Byakko and in Sairou. Ouba is not here now, and will soon be wed to Kintsusei of the East. Won't she?"

"Yes," Nefuru agreed. "And everything you've said has convinced me even more that it's the right thing to do. As you say, Ouba is a Princess, but she has no particular influence away from Arudo and nothing to tempt a demon to snare her. If Kinka is at risk, Kinka is at least trained to fight and if Rouhei is as wise as I believe him to be, she will have all the skills of the Han-ke honed to a fine art for the moment that she might need them. In the end, if it comes to it, I'm sure Kinka can take care of herself."

"In the meantime, I'll wait for Zarin's report," Sashi said softly, setting the scroll down on her husband's desk. "And then, I suppose, we'll see just what exactly these so called people of Byakko have in store for us."

The sky was brassy and clear above the mountains as Anara, her husband and their young guide made their way carefully into the desert, following the well-worn track that once, generations earlier, had been the pathway used by miners to return to the many small villages that had once dotted around this area. Since the mining had dried up, many of the settlements too now lay abandoned, and only those, like Shouki, with enough natural resources to go on had flourished in the barren landscape.

The Kanin Peaks were always imposing, but somehow they seemed even more forbidding that morning, Anara decided, shielding her gaze from the bright stream of sunlight that slipped between the jagged, dark shafts of rock and granite. Her daughter had concealed herself within this place, she knew, for four long years, and inwardly she said a prayer of thanks to Byakko that that was the case no more. Myoume was young, , and the burdens on her had been heavy ones. Yet she had borne them and survived, and now had begun to lay the foundations for her own future away from the Western lands.

But somehow she still felt uneasy.

Anara cast Haruka a sidelong glance, taking in the young girl's tension with a frown. It was clear from her expression that Haruka

was terrified of going back into the mountain, yet she had resolutely made the trek back there with them in silence, every step in the right direction a victory of courage over instinct.

“Haruka?” She murmured, and the child glanced up, meeting Anara’s concerned blue eyes with clouded ones of her own.

“It feels cold here,” she said softly. “Do you feel it too, Anara-san? Like there are ghosts on the wind waiting to swallow us up.”

“I don’t know about ghosts on the wind.” Anara shook her head, suppressing a shiver as a sudden chill touched her own spine. “It’s all right. We won’t let anything happen to you, I promise.”

Haruka did not reply right away, her gaze flitting to the cave entrance. Then she sighed, shaking her head.

“You and Geiyo-san are only normal people, though, aren’t you?” she said at length. “You’re not special, even though your kids were. You’re just ordinary village folk. You can’t fight magic, can you?”

“You’d be surprised what we’re capable of.” This time it was Anara’s husband Shirobu who responded, a wry smile touching his lips. “Raising stellar warriors is a whole other experience.”

He sighed, his gaze shifting to the mountain, and Anara felt her heart clench as she interpreted the regret in his dark eyes.

“Besides, I’ve long since believed myself beholden to the God in some way or other,” he added softly. “I’m not afraid of helping you, Haru-chan. If we can put your mind at rest somehow, then I’ll do what I can to help.”

“Beholden?” Haruka frowned. “What do you mean, Geiyo-san?”

Pain crossed Shirobu’s expression, and he shook his head.

“It’s a long story,” he murmured. “Suffice it to say that Byakko called and I was found wanting. That’s all.”

“Shirobu…” Anara faltered, reaching across to slip her fingers into his. “Noone blames you. Noone has ever blamed you. You must stop blaming yourself — people make their own choices.”

“But they might have been different choices, if not for my carelessness,” Shirobu responded.

He cast Haruka a grin.

“Do you know where we’re heading?” he asked gently. “You told Anara that you had a good memory for pathways, so I hope you can

find your way. Even though Myoume lived here for a while, I don't know my way around the inner passages of the mountain in the way she did, and so we'll be relying on your navigation."

"I know where it is," Haruka nodded her head, pulling her cape more tightly around her as the wind whipped through her dark hair. "It's like it's location is tattooed into my brain. I dreamed about it before I found it, only I didn't know it until I came to be there. I'd never forget how to find it. It felt like somewhere I'd been before, even though I never had."

"Maybe Subaru came there," Anara suggested. "In her previous life."

"I s'pose," Haruka looked surprised. "It's a cave full of stars, so I guess it makes sense."

"Myoume used to talk about a cave dotted with stars, when she was a little girl," Shirobu remembered. "From what she's said since, I have the distinct impression that she's been to the place we're going, in the past. There's something in these mountains that calls to Byakko's people, it seems. I don't know what it is, but something strong."

"There's a shrine deep within the mountains somewhere," Anara frowned. "That's the place where the young boy died. The one whose sister was brought back to the village when Myoume asked for our help. You can't have forgotten, surely? That place was supposed to house something belonging to Byakko… something that Miramu should have protected with his life, had things gone a different way."

"I will never forget anything that relates to your son, Anara," Shirobu said gravely. "Not so long as there is breath in me, I won't."

"*Your* son?" Haruka started, glancing from Anara to Shirobu with a look of confusion. "I don't understand? Aren't you Toroki and Amefuri's Ma and Pa?"

"Not exactly," Anara shook her head. "Myoume… is our child. But Miramu… was mine alone. He was… conceived before Shirobu and I met."

"I never really accepted him, I suppose you could say," Shirobu added. "In hindsight, I made mistakes. But you can't turn back time, sadly. So we go on."

"I can." Haruka glanced at her hands. "I can turn back time. Can't I?"

"Yes, but not like that," Anara responded.

“But you said he died, so maybe I could use my magic and bring him back?” Haruka suggested. “Amefuri-san, I mean. Cos if I did, then maybe you could sort out whatever shit you had between you. An’ if I can fix broken things, that must mean I could use it like that… mustn’t it?”

“No, Haruka.” Anara shook her head. “My son chose what he wanted and I won’t argue with that decision. He saved his sister’s life and sacrificed his own. He wanted that peace and I wouldn’t want to disturb it, now. Besides, even if you could bring someone back from the dead — which I doubt — I don’t think it would be a wise thing to try and do. There are things you shouldn’t mess with.”

“Maybe,” Haruka sighed. “I suppose you’re right. It’s just…”

“You were thinking of your friends, too?” Shirobu asked, and Haruka nodded.

“I should’ve protected them,” she explained sadly. “Even if it wasn’t my fault that somethin’ hurt them, if I’m really this Subaru person, I should have known what to do. And now we’re back here and I don’t even know how to protect you if there’s still a monster here.”

She glanced at the ground.

“You’ve been kind to me,” she said softly. “I don’t want you being hurt because you helped me. You’re nice people an’ nice people shouldn’t be hurt. It’s not right. It shouldn’t be that way.”

“No, I agree,” Anara squeezed the girl’s hand gently. “That’s why Byakko exists, through people like you, to try and stop that from happening. It did occur to me, Haruka, that you might have been sent to us here because of Miramu’s death. That because he’s now passed over, Byakko needs someone else here to take his place, and that’s why he stirred your soul from it’s sleep and gave you the powers he did. I don’t know it for certain, of course, but it certainly seems possible. , Myoume is in Kutou, now. And that means none of the Byakko Shichi Seishi are in the West.”

“But you said that Byakko no Miko came an’ fixed stuff,” Haruka’s brows knitted together. “So if I’m Subaru, does it mean that there’s goin’ to be another Byakko no Miko? Or is it jus’ me on my own for some reason or other?”

“With Miramu dead, it would be about impossible to summon the God to this world,” Shirobu said frankly. “Seven Seishi are needed to do that, alongside the Miko. And when Myoume was last here, she told us that she no longer had her powers in the same way as she had

had before. It's unlikely, Haruka. Whatever your reason for being awoken like this, I doubt that it's a legend on the repeat."

"It's hard to know what Byakko is thinking," Anara mused. "For the time being, we have another mystery to solve. Haru-chan, you're the one with the strongest sense of this place, and I'm sure that, if whatever was here the last time is still here, you'll pick it up sooner than we do. So keep your senses primed, all right? We're counting on you."

"I… I'll try." Haruka bit her lip. "I'm not even sure I know how to do that, but I'll try."

She skipped over the uneven rocks, hesitating for a moment, then disappearing into the darkness of the mountain passages. Anara exchanged glances with her husband, then, her heart in her throat she followed suit. Behind her, she could hear Shirobu grab a dried tree branch from the debris outside, scraping flint on the stone wall to create a torch, and inwardly she berated herself for not having thought of such a thing first.

She truly was on edge, she acknowledged, yet it wasn't the current situation that was preying so badly on her mind so much as the deeper, underlying worry about Byakko's true motives. If Haruka could be called to arms, she reflected apprehensively, then what of her daughter in the East? Would Myoume have found peace and happiness only to be dragged away from it once more by the Tiger's claws? If the God had summoned a small girl to fight for him, there was no reason to suppose he would ignore the presence of a full-grown Seishi living in a foreign land, and despite herself, Anara bit her lip.

"Please, Byakko-kami-sama, I'll do whatever you ask me to do." She murmured, absently twisting her hands together as she walked. "But don't ruin my daughter's chance of a normal life. Please. Even if it costs me mine — don't destroy hers."

"Anara?" Shirobu's voice came from behind her, and Anara was aware of the concern in his tones. She turned, offering him a sad smile.

"Just a mother worrying about the implications of this for her child." She said honestly. "It's crossed your mind too, surely? That we need to find out what's going on for Myoume's sake as much as we do Haruka's."

"And perhaps even Miramu's, Byakko rest his soul." Shirobu nodded. "And to that end, we shouldn't let the kid get too far ahead. Divine power or not, she's still a child and her magic is barely

developed. While she's in our care, Byakko's trusting us to keep her safe — we ought to pick up the pace."

"I agree." Anara glanced ahead, raising her voice. "Haru-chan, don't go so quickly. We're all going together, remember? Don't think you can shield us from harm by disappearing into the blackness."

"I wasn't." Haruka paused, turning on her heel as she regarded Anara earnestly. "But I don't feel… whatever it is… in the caves any more. And I was just following the pathway — I didn't realise I was putting so much space between us."

"You have to take pity on us older folk who aren't as young and spry as you," Shirobu told her, amusement in his tones. "Remember, Haruka, Anara and I are on the verge of becoming grandparents. Our spring days are long behind us now."

"You don't look that old and crocked up to me." Haruka eyed him thoughtfully. "I'd say you were quite strong really, Geiyo-san. If you got into a fight, I guess you could win it okay, by the looks."

"Haruka…" Anara trailed off, and Haruka grinned, shrugging her shoulders.

"My Pa was a weakling and an idiot, so he got drunk an' wound up pickin' fights with the wrong people," she said casually. "But he was skinny an' couldn't hold his ground. I think you could, Geiyo-san. I guess it's because you go to Eiroku so much, huh?"

"What has Eiroku to do with anything?" Anara looked startled.

"Everyone knows that town is a dive," Haruka said dismissively. "The people who live there are prickly an' unfriendly an' they grasp everythin' they can lay their hands on. They got some new pump in the centre now, to give water t'everyone who passes through, 'cept they charge toll on it an' punish people who ain't got the coin to pay for it. There's fights there all the time… you have to be pretty tough to go there a lot an' survive."

"It's true that there are cities with a better reputation in the West," Shirobu acknowledged, "and that things go on behind closed doors in Eiroku that it's better not asking questions about. Sometimes trade demands I go there, so I do. I mind my own business and I honour my contracts, so noone ever makes trouble with me. Not everyone there is without honour — I have a few people I consider good friends that still live in the city. But you're right, Haruka. It's not the kind of place to go alone if you don't know what to expect. Certainly not for a woman to go — not in any circumstances."

As he said this last sentence, he glanced at Anara, who flushed, glancing at the ground.

“I was young and stupid and I paid for it in all ways,” she murmured. “That’s why you go, Shirobu. And why I stay at home.”

She reached Haruka’s side at that moment, stretching out a hand and grasping the young girl’s fingers gently in her own.

“And you don’t need to either now, Haru-chan,” she said frankly. “There’s nothing you need from there. You’re welcome to stay in Shouki-mura, where it’s safe and where you don’t have to worry about anyone trying to hurt you. It’d be better all round, I think, if you stuck with us.”

“You really think so?” Haruka looked doubtful. “But I’m really not yours, you know. I mean, I’m just a kid who doesn’t belong anywhere. You helped me, but you ain’t obliged to do any more for me. I’m already plenty grateful, you know. An’ more in your debt than I can repay, so…”

“Anara’s right,” Shirobu said simply. “We’d both be happier knowing you were safe with us than roaming dangerous places in the black of night.”

Haruka opened her mouth to reply, but at that moment they reached an opening in the cave wall and she frowned, pursing her lips.

“In there,” she murmured, gesturing towards the doorway with a mixture of apprehension and fear. “That’s where it was.”

She glanced at Shirobu, a pleading look in her blue eyes.

“Whatever it was that tried to stifle me ain’t there now,” she added. “I’m sure, because I don’t feel it like I did before. But… Hami an’ the chibi… they might still be. An’…if they’re dead in there… I… I can’t see them again.”

“Then I’ll go first,” Shirobu decided, sliding his broad frame between the youngster and the cave wall as he cast her a smile. “If necessary, I can bury your friends somewhere safe where the mountain creatures can’t disturb them. And then we can investigate properly, without you worrying about them. Byakko already has their souls. I’ll do what I can for their earthly remains.”

“Thank you.” Relief glittered in Haruka’s gaze. “I’m not being a coward, it’s just… they were friends of mine. An’ if I see them again, I might cry and stuff. I really don’t want to do that, but it hurts. And it makes me think I should have protected them somehow, too.”

“Stop thinking that way,” Anara instructed. “Whatever happened here, I’m certain that it was in no way your fault.”

“Maybe,” Haruka acknowledged. “But it don’t make it any easier to deal with.”

“You both stay here, if you like,” Shirobu suggested. “I won’t be long, and I’d rather you stuck together. Even if there aren’t any black spells in this cave now, it’s an easy place to lose your way if you’re not careful.”

“We won’t leave this passage,” Anara promised. “Thank you, Shirobu. We’ll wait for you to come back.”

“He’s real protective, ain’t he?” As Shirobu disappeared into the darkness, Haruka let out a heavy sigh, leaning back against the wall and kicking her heels absently against the ebony rock. “Even if it was dangerous, he’d still go. Wouldn’t he?”

“Yes,” Anara agreed. “He’s always been that way, so long as I’ve known him. But then… I suppose that’s not surprising, considering that when we met I probably needed that protection. He’s someone who takes his duties as husband and father very seriously, that’s all. And most of the time I’m glad of it.”

“My Pa wasn’t a bit like that,” Haruka reflected. “I mean, I don’t hate him or shit. He wasn’t unkind to me. I jus’ don’t think he knew much what to do with a kid, after Ma died. An’ then he would go drinkin’ an’ gettin’ into trouble with folks. Owin’ them money and all kinds of things. So in the end, he picked a fight too big for him.”

She frowned.

“If it’d been Geiyo-san, he’d have won the fight,” she added. “But somehow I don’t think Geiyo-san would’a been goaded into fightin’ it in the first place.”

“Probably not,” Anara shook her head.

“Anara-san, what did he mean, when he said he’d let Miramu-san down?” Curiosity flickered in the girl’s bright eyes, and Anara sighed, glancing at her hands.

“My son was born out of wedlock,” she said slowly. “Like I said, he wasn’t Shirobu’s child. When we married, it was the one thing that we disagreed on. And it never really changed, up until the day Miramu left home.”

“That’s messed up,” Haruka objected. “He wouldn’t accept a kid that wasn’t his but he’s fine about looking after me who’s just

appeared from nowhere? I don't get it. It doesn't make sense."

Anara closed her eyes briefly, as memories flashed through her senses.

"I was sixteen when Miramu was born," she murmured. "I was young and foolish, like I said. I was born in Eiroku's outskirts, Haruka. I used to sneak out from my family's home often, to experience as much of the city life as I could. Because of that naivety and my stupid curiosity, I got into trouble I couldn't get out of. Miramu was the result."

Haruka's eyes widened with alarm.

"You mean… some bastard raped you?" she whispered, and Anara flinched, slowly nodding.

"The speed with which you worked that out suggests you know a little about things you shouldn't, too," she observed, and Haruka shook her head.

"Not how you think," she said frankly. "Course, I know it happens and stuff. Livin' out, you couldn't not know. But noone's ever touched me. I wouldn't let them — why the hell d'you think I was so dusty an' grimy when you picked me up? Sure, I could wash if I wanted to. But if I didn't, I looked like a boy. An' a messy, worthless one at that. Noone even looked at me — so I was safe."

"You're pretty smart for such a young girl, you know." Despite herself, Anara smiled. "I hadn't thought of it as a strategy — are you cross that I destroyed your façade?"

"No," Haruka shook her head. "It's sort of nice being clean for a change, an' if I'm sleeping at your place, there's not much risk of anyone comin' for me, is there?"

"Probably not, not considering Shirobu is around." Anara agreed.

"So your son… Miramu-san… he was that guy's baby, then? That jerk guy who hurt you?"

"Yes."

"An' that's why…" Haruka trailed off, looking thoughtful as she pieced the fragments of information together. "I get it. So Geiyo-san was pissed that someone'd done that, an' that's why he stayed mad."

"He couldn't accept Miramu because of how he was conceived," Anara sighed. "I think that whenever he looked at my son he remembered the night he brought me to the village, bloodstained and

crying like I was never going to stop. I owe him everything in this life and a lot more, Haru-chan. And I love him more than anything in the world. But we always argued over Miramu and whether or not I should have insisted on keeping him as close as I did. Though we were very careful never to tell Miramu what the reason was, Shirobu never acknowledged him and even though the boy showed genuine skill for herbs and remedies, he refused point blank to take Miramu as his apprentice."

She twisted her hands together.

"Then, one day, Miramu overheard us talking about it," she continued slowly. "I don't know… perhaps keeping it hidden was counterproductive in the long run. Either way, it came as a huge shock to both of the children. I never saw Miramu truly in a rage before that day, or realised how fierce a temper he even had. It was the first time…"

She faltered, sinking down onto the ground and after a moment of hesitation, Haruka followed suit.

"This is an awful thing to say about someone I loved with all my heart," she murmured. "But in that moment I saw his father reflected in him for the first time."

"So what happened?" Haruka asked. "I mean… if you don't mind telling me. Just he was like me — Byakko's chosen — so I guess I kinda feel bad for him, wanting to die and shit like that."

"He left," Anara said simply. "He went to Eiroku, sought out and killed the man who had sired him. He never made a secret of the crime — he left evidence at the scene to implicate himself, as though he wanted people to know he'd done it. And then he disappeared. And that… was the last time I ever saw my son."

"The last time," Haruka echoed the words softly. "Shit. That really sucks."

"I wish I could've told him that it didn't matter to me who his father was," Anara continued. "I loved him regardless, and always will."

"Do you think… that it was Byakko's magic… that made him angry?" Haruka asked slowly. "I mean… do you think it… made him…"

"Crazy?" Anara finished gently, and Haruka flushed, nodding her head.

“I guess,” she admitted. “In the cave, when it all happened, I didn’t understand what the things were I was feeling. There was all the dark stuff, and then something inside of me surged up and… I wondered. Since you said he did bad things… I wondered.”

“I think that Miramu’s anger made him do things he shouldn’t have done,” Anara said evenly. “The more he did, the angrier he became with himself for doing them. He trapped himself in a vicious circle which began with the murder of his father and ended only with his death in Kutou a year and a half ago. That’s why I don’t want to bring him back, Haruka. Much as I wanted to speak to him again, at least now I know he has the peace he never had before.”

She smiled faintly.

“I don’t think it was Byakko that made him turn to bad ways,” she concluded. “Myoume’s burden was, in many ways, a heavier one… yet she bore it and came through in full possession of her wits. I think that it was simply the fact that Miramu loved me as much as he did — and he could never quite reconcile himself to being born the way he was.”

Haruka pursed her lips, and Anara could tell the youngster was working this all out carefully for herself. Then, at length, she nodded.

“I won’t mention him again, not when Geiyo-san is there,” she decided. “And not if you don’t want me to, either. I don’t want to hurt you, Anara-san. But I’m glad you told me. It helps, I think, to know that even though he did bad things, it wasn’t because of Byakko’s power.”

“If Myoume was here, she’d be able to explain much better than I can,” Anara responded. “But as it is, you’ll have to make do with us.”

“Anara? Haruka?”

At that moment Shirobu re-appeared in the opening, his hands grimy and his expression one of consternation. “It’s all right. You can come in now.”

“Were they… still there?” Haruka asked hesitantly, and Shirobu nodded his head.

“Yes,” he agreed. “Byakko rest them, they were. Poor mites.”

He rested his hand gently on Haruka’s shoulder.

“Whatever killed them, Haru-chan, I’m certain it wasn’t anything you did,” he said firmly. “From their looks I understand why you didn’t want to see them again. Something savaged them from the

inside — something dark and twisted, sucking the life right out of them. I don't think that it was you. In fact, you're lucky you survived. It looked like whatever was there meant business."

"From the inside?" Haruka's eyes widened. "You mean… some monster or something was *inside* of them? Or… at least… inside of Hamiko?"

"Why do you say that?" Anara glanced at her, and Haruka swallowed hard.

"The things she said…" she whispered. "It wasn't *Hamiko* that said them. It was something else. Some*one* else. Someone who was in that cave and who used Hami to attack me and escape."

"You're assuming things you can't know, Haru-chan," Anara began, but Shirobu shook his head, gravity touching his expression.

"No. I think the girl is right," he said soberly. "Anara, there's something written on the wall in here. Something burnt into the stone with a hell of a lot of force. I think you should see it — I think it was left there for people to see."

"Written?" Anara stared at him for a moment, then nodded. "All right. You too, Haru-chan. Your friends are at rest now, so it's safe enough."

"I can't read," Haruka objected. "So what's the point in me seeing? I know what's in that cave."

"Come anyway." Shirobu told her. "We should stick together."

Haruka sighed, but reluctantly she nodded her head, and Anara grasped her more tightly by the hand, leading the way into the cavern beyond. At first, the only thing that caught her gaze was the stellar motif that stretched across the one wall and she let out a little gasp, her eyes widening as she interpreted its meaning.

"Byakko's stars," she murmured. "The constellations are all Byakko's stars."

"One of them is broken," Haruka gestured to the furthest corner of the chamber. "That one. That's what I tried to fix, when the whole thing started cracking and then that dark cloud of whatever it was attacked us."

Anara glanced in the direction Haruka pointed, and her heart caught in her throat.

"Amefuri," she whispered. "Amefuri's stars, Haruka. The broken

constellation is the one belonging to Amefuri."

"Really?" Haruka looked startled. "So whatever it was came out because…"

She trailed off, then,

"Was it… Amefuri-san's… *ghost*?"

"It wasn't Miramu," Shirobu answered before Anara could speak, a faint hint of desperation in his tones. "It *couldn't* have been. Miramu wouldn't have killed innocent children. And he wouldn't left a message… not like that."

He waved his arm towards the opposite wall, sending the flame of his torch fluttering as he did so, and Anara's eyes widened as she interpreted the roughly scrawled characters that had been gouged into the stone wall.

Slowly she shook her head.

"No," she said softly. "It wasn't Miramu. My son is at rest — at last, he has the peace he's always searched for. My son has no reason to be here, in a place like this, hurting people in that way. No matter what he did in life… I won't believe him capable of it after death. Not something like this. Not with a message like that."

Haruka moved cautiously across the chamber, running her finger gingerly into the grooves of the nearest character. She shivered.

"It feels bad," she murmured. "What does it say, Anara-san?"

Anara bit her lip.

"Revenge," she replied. "That's what it says, Haru-chan. Revenge."

So now she knew.

Makiko pushed open the door of Sashi's chamber, slipping inside and shutting the divide firmly behind her as she sought to contain her excitement. Ouba's words echoed once more through her head and despite herself she clenched her fists, allowing the swell of triumph to rush through the borrowed body.

It was not hopeless.

"Suzaku no Shinzahou," she whispered, relishing the sound of the words as she spoke them aloud. "In my wildest dreams I never could have guessed that something like this would come to pass."

She sank down on her bed, leaning back against the wall as she contemplated the conversation with Nefuru. Even though he had commented on her demeanour, she reflected, he had not suspected that the person he had spoken to had not been his wife at all, but the dead spirit of his Great Grandmother returned to exact her revenge. He was as spiritually barren as she had supposed, and as she ruminated on this, she realised snippets of her own life's memories were indeed becoming more cohesive in her head. Where Sashi's memories had been dominant, now, piece by piece, her own life had begun to knit itself back together and she clung hold of this knowledge greedily, certain that it could be used to her advantage.

Clearly she recalled the stories of Genbu no Shinzahou, and even the attempts to seize hold of it that were made by her family and Tenkou's other supporters during both her childhood and her time in the Western Lands. No attempts had ever been successful, and the two or three times expeditions had been sent into the snowy mountains, none of the men sent had returned alive. The impenetratable fortress of Genbu's treasure had only heightened the mystique of the powerful, desireable object — yet it had remained quite firmly out of her hands.

But now, a century later, things had changed. From her time sealed in the cave, Makiko had been aware of the pulsing aura of Byakko's Shinzahou and had disliked its stifling presence, knowing that it was probably serving only to strengthen the divide between her and the outside world. But that Suzaku had been summoned or his Shinzahou brought into the world… of this she had been completely ignorant. And though in life she had looked down on the South, considering both their people and their culture backwards and uninspiring, now she found her thoughts turning to Kounan with fresh enthusiasm.

In that land resided the one person who could make her hopes come to fruition.

Sukunami Hikari. Suzaku no Shinzahou.

Yet how was she to go about getting to it?

She sighed, glancing at Sashi's delicate hands with a sense of frustration. This body was growing weaker, she knew that, and it would not be long before she would be forced to leave it and find a new host through which to do her bidding. Though the Princess's spiritual energy had been several hundred times that of the pitiful infant in the cave, it too would reach its limit and crumble. It was inconvenient, not having a form of her own to utilise, and her time to make Sashi useful was running out. Yet she knew nothing of Kounan's lands, and balked at darting carelessly into danger.

If Suzaku was recently summoned, it was more than likely that this treasure would bring with it guardians bearing the Phoenix's mark, and she had no desire to go up against an unknown enemy.

Then there was the matter of Byakko's chi.

She got to her feet, moving across to the window as she remembered the flash of Han Daiyu's life force that had pierced briefly through her senses. Nothing more had come of it, and she might have thought it was simply imagination, yet somehow deep within her she knew that it was not. Byakko had indeed begun to move, and even though she had dispatched Zarin, she had not yet convinced Nefuru that these people were his enemies.

She clenched her fists in frustration, remembering the conversation about Kinka.

"If I had been here when that girl left, I would know without a doubt whether or not she bore my curse," she muttered under her breath. "As it is, this pitiful Ueke woman's spiritual abilities are not enough for me to reach far beyond this court. That Amefuri was here, for a brief moment, I have no doubt. But unless the others use the powers that Tiger gave them, and do so in close proximity to where I am, I cannot sense them. This will not do. I cannot operate at such a disadvantage. I need to find a way to bring Suzaku no Shinzahou here — before Sashi's body begins to fail."

At least Nefuru had not demanded she recalled Zarin, she acknowledged. There was some small chance that he might succeed where she had so far failed, and at present, she needed all the help she could get.

"Nefuru may be my great grandson, but he's irritatingly stubborn, just like his great grandfather was," she murmured. "I had to poison Meishitei to sleep in order to grasp hold of power — but that was before my cursed son had the foresight to summon priests and have his family's spiritual abilities sealed completely. I can't infiltrate Nefuru or even my grandson Heiboutei with this limited amount of magic — perhaps not at all, considering. So this Ueke is the only key I have. I must make sure I make the most of it."

She moved to the mirror, touching her cheek absently as she met the Ueke Princess's dark eyes.

"At least, if Sashi was to die, they might believe it a demon's assassination," she mused. "And in the end, I don't care what they think so long as it suits my cause. Hang on a little longer, Ueke no Hime. I have plenty of uses for your feeble body yet!"

Chapter 13

Chapter Twelve
:::Flashback:::
The Imperial Court of Arudo, a century earlier

"You sent for me, my Lord?"

The smartly dressed nobleman dropped to his knee, bowing his head low in respect before raising quizzical green eyes to meet the Prince's troubled blue ones. For a moment there was silence between them, then the Prince let out his breath in a rush, slowly nodding his head.

"Stand before me, Han Daiyu," he murmured. "Meet my gaze, face to face. I have need of you — and I need to know that you are equal to that need."

"Yes, my Lord." Obediently Daiyu got to his feet, eying his companion with a mixture of concern and apprehension.

The Prince was still a young man, barely seventeen summers, yet the weight of the whole world was reflected in those distinctive seiran eyes. Many at court had commented on his likeness to his father, the popular Emperor Meishitei, and Daiyu too had long since seen the likeness between them both in character and in appearance. The eyes, a legacy from the royal house's warrior heritage had been passed down from King to Prince ever since the first soldier King had snatched together land in the West and united it under the name "Sairou", many generations earlier. His hair framed his youthful features in loose curls, yet unlike the Emperor's chestnut tinged waves and sun-touched complexion, the Prince had inherited the ebony locks and delicate pallor of his mother, giving him a unique and striking appearance.

Daiyu had known Prince Shikarou for seven years, since he had officially entered into the Emperor's service and sworn his loyalty to his sovereign. Too well he remembered the wide-eyed youngster of ten who had watched the encounter in curious silence. Since that time, often had been the visits the young heir to Sairou's throne had made to Daiyu's study, to hear stories about the stars that moved in the heavens above them. Fascinated by the twisting, shifting constellations, Shikarou had come to think of Daiyu as an unofficial addition to his royal tutors, and for his part, Daiyu had found educating the Prince a welcome break from other, less pleasant aspects of his duty to the crown.

Today, however, the atmosphere was very different. Though the Prince had discarded his usual formality and let his hair loose, there was a determination in his expression which told Daiyu that today's conversation would have nothing to do with the stars that dotted the Western sky. Little by little over the past four years, the astrologer had noticed subtle changes in the boy's demeanour, as little by little the child had become a man, and today, despite the illusion of youth that his casual attire gave him, Daiyu was perceptive enough to realise this was a conversation between adults, not teacher and student. From the shadows beneath Shikarou's eyes, Daiyu knew that whatever had heralded this summons, it was not a matter that he should take lightly.

One day he would make a good Emperor, or so many of the court's current nobility said. Yet to Daiyu, the boy was already an Emperor in spirit, and although he had only begun to stretch his fingers towards the dangerous flames of politics, there was a steeliness in the depths of those blue eyes that suggested to the assassin that perhaps here was something he had inherited from his forceful Kutou mother, .

As he looked at him, Daiyu was forced to admit that, although the bulk of Shikarou's features were those of his Father Meishitei, today for the first time he could see the fleeting resemblance between the Prince and his Eastern-born mother, Makiko of Kutou.

At this admission, his own emerald gaze clouded.

"*This is a matter for Nishi no Kage, Highness, isn't it?" he murmured, and the Prince started, then nodded, toying absently with his rings of state as he did so. His discomfort was evident, and despite himself Daiyu felt a pang of sympathy for the youngster who, for the past four years had been backed into a political corner.*

"*My Father's condition does not improve." At length Shikarou spoke, his words shaking slightly as he sought to maintain the demeanour that befitted a Crown Prince of the realm. "His doctors do not think that they can cure him, and he lingers now as he did four years ago — near death with no sign of regaining his wits."*

"*Yes, my Lord," Daiyu acknowledged, waiting patiently for the Prince to reach the true reason for his summons.*

"*My mother has governed in this time," the young man continued. "You do not need me to tell you what nature of rule has come to pass since then."*

Daiyu stiffened, and slowly he nodded his head.

"I understand your implication," he murmured. "My uncle's bones lie in their grave still screaming out for justice. Were he to be a lone victim, I would be able to step back and view it simply as a grievance against the Han. But he is not. More people than just he have disappeared from the court, my Prince. If I may be so bold, in four years more have disappeared at unknown hands than have been victims of my duty as Nishi no Kage over the course of seven."

"You are not an arbitrary killer." The Prince rested his hands on the stained-wood desk in front of him, raising his gaze to his companion's earnestly. "My father told me, long before his incapacitation, that the Han-ke have acted in the shadows for our family for generations. He said things that I did not understand, then — but he told me that of the Han, there will always be one whose soul belongs more to his prince than to himself. I remember quite clearly the day you stood before him and swore your oath, spilling your blood onto his blade of Byakko without even a moment of hesitation. Father told me then that a man who makes that pact is a man who will not betray his King, for fear of being punished by the Tiger himself, and I have often remembered those words over the years since that day."

He smiled faintly.

"You have certainly tolerated enough from a curious boy Prince to suggest to me that my Father's assertion was right," he added. "Your role here is truly all-encompassing, and only now, as I approach adulthood, do I realise how valuable a tradition it is for those of my kin. As a boy I did not realise that you were more than simply a man who read the stars. But now I understand. I fully understand the burden we have placed on you as members of the Royal House."

"It is an age old pact between the Han-ke and the throne," Daiyu said simply. "I do not consider it a burden. It's the duty given me by my birth."

"Yes," Shikarou agreed, "but it is a heavy duty all the same. Whatever you say, I know that must be the case. It could not be otherwise, because I know from my own experience that you are not a cruel nor a cold man. You showed me such kindness and patience when I was young and heedlessly at your door asking you this question or that that I realise it must have taken some toll on you to carry out my Father's orders on more than one occasion."

"No man refuses an Imperial order if they value their life," Daiyu pointed out. "For my part, I'm fortunate enough to have been born into a high-status family with very little to ask for. In return, I protect this country's peace and eliminate my Emperor's enemies to ensure that stability remains. It seems a fair enough deal to me. You need not

sympathise with my lot — I was raised to it. Trained for it. This was the only life I was ever going to have."

"Ruling Sairou is a bloody pact of secrets and mind-games, so it seems," Shikarou sighed. "I'm starting to realise that political matters are very seldom light affairs."

He ran his finger over his rings once more, then,

"Your grandfather acted as assassin before you, and when he died, you were chosen to carry on his mantle as court astronomer," he concluded. "Of all of your family, you were the one selected and my Father always believed that the choice was the right one, although it meant bypassing your Father's generation completely. I know that you are a person in whom Father has ultimate trust. So I will also, Daiyu. I must."

Daiyu's lips twitched into a humourless smile.

"Such praise is honour indeed, from both an Emperor and his son," he said quietly. "An assassin's soul is one that a man should not want to claim. I have done enough to know that it is better left in your hands than in mine alone."

"The Han assassin is sworn to serve and obey the Emperor above all others," the Prince murmured. "I do not know… whether that loyalty can be transferred… to those who rule in a King's name."

"By which description do you mean yourself, my Lord, or the Empress Makiko, as Protector in Meishitei-heika's stead?"

"Either, I suppose," Shikarou looked surprised. "I suppose I simply want to know whether with Father incapacitated, you have also become a blunted weapon or whether or not you stalk the shadows for another in the meantime."

Daiyu stretched out his hand, eying the fading scar that crossed the back.

"I swore my life in blood to the Emperor," he said evenly. "He is my master. I am not transferable property — it doesn't work that way."

"I see," The Prince looked crestfallen. "So that means that my word also… is no good? You will not act… on my behalf?"

Daiyu eyed his companion carefully.

"You have a serious need for my services, don't you?" he realised. "This is not simply a matter of who I act for, but more, what lengths I can be coaxed to in the Emperor's absence. You seek to try me out, my Lord? Or something more? Your entire demeanour suggests the latter… whatever you

want from me, it is no small feat, is it?"

"I fear not," Shikarou agreed. "I can offer you little incentive to make it more appealing. If you were to fail, your death would be assured, and possibly mine as well. Even if you were to succeed… it may cost you your freedom and your life anyway. Which is why I needed to know, Daiyu — just what your loyalties are."

Daiyu pursed his lips, glancing at his hands once more.

"My cousin left this court and disappeared four years ago, when my uncle's body was discovered," he said quietly. "That act still remains unavenged, though I gave her my word that I would do it. Since that time, people have hunted for Jiene, though the only crime I can find her guilty of is loving a man who lost his life in a horrible manner. A slight against the Han-ke is not mine to avenge, because my soul no longer belongs to the Han. But it is still a slight I feel, my Lord. I am still Han."

"I'm not sure that answered my question."

"Possibly not," Daiyu agreed. "But you see, my Lord, there is more to this than simply the Han's insult unanswered. My cousin was not simply a grieving teenager who fled this place in a fit of pique. Jiene was chosen, by Byakko, to bear the sign of Toroki. And things she predicted… they have come to pass. So I believe… your Lord Father… will never again wake. He is not dying. He is already dead."

"Already…?" The Prince paled, gripping hold of the table tightly in his dismay. "But… he breathes still! Surely there is some hope?"

"If there was, my Prince, I would not be speaking to you in this way," Daiyu said candidly. "Nishi no Kage answers only the call of his Emperor. Meishitei-heika's body still breathes, true enough. But his spirit is gone. His soul is stolen. Jiene predicted it, and I too can feel it. There is an absence of life surrounding him — he lives only to serve as another's figurehead. While he lives, there is a reason for you not to be crowned. And therefore the support owed you, as his heir, can easily be spirited away."

Shikarou's seiran eyes widened for a moment, and Daiyu had a fleeting impression once more of that young boy, staring at him from across the Emperor's study. Then he frowned.

"I see," he murmured. "So you came to me today not to answer my summons so much as to tell me what I did not want to accept — that Father's illness is no ordinary ailment and that he will not recover, no matter what is done. More, though you have not said it, I know you believe my Mother to be responsible. Just as you hold her guilty for your uncle's assassination, four years ago."

"I have not said such things."

"No, because to do so could be treason," The Prince agreed. "Even so, they're what you feel. And I am grateful for your counsel, Nishi no Kage. Cryptic as it is, it has somewhat put my mind at rest. I still had some doubts, but now, I realise, I should not. I must not. For Sairou's sake… I cannot."

"My Lord?"

"Your cousin Jiene's whereabouts remain unknown?"

"Yes, my Lord," Daiyu agreed. "If I was to look for her, perhaps I would find her. But I have not looked. Therefore I do not know."

"Too bad. I would have liked to have heard her prophesies myself," Shikarou pursed his lips. "She is not the only one blessed by Byakko, is she? In this climate, with such a conflict of faith, you have kept the matter a secret. But you are one of his warriors too, are you not? Byakko's Amefuri as well as the Imperial blade, Nishi no Kage."

"To my Prince I will not lie." Daiyu bowed his head in acknowledgement. "Yes, Lord. I am as you surmise."

"My Father may have suspected his life was in danger, for he left me a written message in the custody of my Uncle Lord Kei a few days before he was taken ill," the Prince continued. "Kei-dono was ordered to give it to me when I was at an age that I could act alone and take back Sairou in Byakko's name. In it he told me about your other identity, and that if I could rely on anyone to help me, it would be you."

"I see." Daiyu's brows knitted together. "Such a missive sounds like my Lord Emperor's way."

"You may see it, if you like."

"If my Prince wishes it."

Shikarou pulled open the desk drawer, removing the parchment and pushing it across the desk.

Slowly Daiyu scooped it up, glancing at it, then back at his companion.

"You are able to read this code, my Lord?"

"I have been taught to, as you have, since I was small," Shikarou agreed. "Just as it was decided then by your family that you would follow that path, I was always being prepared to one day be King."

"A foolish question on my part," Daiyu admitted, a rueful smile touching his lips. "My apologies."

His gaze returned to the scroll, his eyes clouding as he fixed on one particular section.

"The demon we fight is among us, and dangerous, yet inextricably part of who we are*," he murmured. "*You may escape it, but only with the help of those Byakko has blessed. Among our court, Nishi no Kage bears another name — that of the warrior Amefuri, one of the chosen of the West. You must make him your strongest ally, for I fear hard times are ahead*."*

"*My Father often knew things. Sensed them, perhaps," Shikarou reclaimed the document, rolling it and putting it away. "When I read it, I remembered the legend of Genbu in the North. Seishi only appear when disaster is about to strike, and a Priestess will be summoned to try and avert it. As yet there is no Priestess. But there is Amefuri and there is Toroki, so it is my belief there will be more."*

"*And the duty you want me to carry out is to find the others and summon Byakko?" Daiyu asked. "In this climate of religious fear and conflict, with the Empress so keen to eradicate all of the Tiger's faith from Sairou? A dangerous duty indeed."*

"*Yes, I do wish for that, if it can be done," The Prince nodded. "But it was not Amefuri I summoned here. It was Nishi no Kage. If you believe my Father is beyond saving, Daiyu, what will you do? You said you would not have spoken to me thus if not for that fact… which means..?"*

"*When the Han astrologer dies, a new one is selected and sworn in blood to the Emperor," Daiyu said evenly. "When an Emperor dies, the Han astrologer swears his blood to the successor, in order to continue his duty to the crown of Sairou. I am the King's tool."*

He smiled.

"*Meishitei-heika's life is beyond saving. I believe Jiene when she says that," he added. "If the Emperor has died, then his son is his successor. You are therefore my master now, whether you are called Emperor or not. I will do whatever you require of me, as befits my position as astrologer to the court."*

Shikarou's eyes flooded with relief, and he nodded.

"*Thank you," he said sincerely.*

"*Thank you is an odd thing to say to an assassin, my Lord," Daiyu reflected.*

"*Not in my view," the Prince shook his head. "Especially considering what I will ask of you is something unforgivable… something which I will*

never gain absolution for, and something for which you will most likely wind up losing your life."

Daiyu smiled wryly.

"That is my duty, if it's asked of me," he said simply. "Whatever it is, my Lord, I will do it. To not do so would be a betrayal of all the oaths my kin have ever sworn to the Royal House, not just my own to your Father. If it kills me, so be it. I will act. You need not worry."

Shikarou pursed his lips, then he opened his drawer again, pulling out his small, ornamental knife of Byakko and laying it on the desk.

"Your blood, please, Nishi no Kage," he said softly. "Let's reaffirm that oath here and now. The path ahead is one which may see the deaths of both of us and many more — but for Sairou's sake, I see no other way. Swear yourself to me now, and I will tell you what it is I need you to do."

Kaidou

The sound of sea birds screaming and wheeling in the sky over Kaidou pierced through the morning bustle and chaos of the wakening city as traders and customers began to stir in search of closing that all important early deal.

In the Ryohi Inn, far above the clamour of the streets below, Suzuno rested her elbows on the windowsill, gazing dreamily down at the milling people. It was almost like she was a world away from them, she mused absently, for even though she had been in Sairou a little while now, she had yet to see anything like the bustling markets of the seaside port. Unlike the desert settlements that they had visited up to now, this was a proper city, and as she watched, she was aware of people of various different appearances and attire calling to one another in a mixture of dialects. Not everyone here was from Sairou, she realised with a jolt. Some were traders from other lands who had arrived on dawn boats with the hope of exchanging their native goods for Sairou's own particular exports.

"It's like a lesson in economics without the dusty old text books," she murmured, and at the sound of her words, Toroki glanced up from where she had been braiding her thick chestnut hair back from her face.

"Something wrong, Suzuno?" she asked, and Suzuno shook her head, flushing pink as she turned to meet her companion's emerald gaze.

"I was just thinking how different Kaidou is from anywhere else we've been so far," she explained. "I didn't really absorb it last night, because Taiitsukun's spell made me so woozy, but it really is a full scale trading port, isn't it? It's not just a seaside resort. It's a really important place."

“It and Shifu, up the coast,” Toroki agreed. “A lot of Sairou’s trade comes into places like that, because it’s easier than crossing the desert. Of course, there are lots of buyers for the gems that come from the Kanin mountains and other mines in this country, so this is one way of selling them to international bidders.”

“That would be the gem trade you and your followers have been disrupting, right?” Suzuno raised an eyebrow, and Toroki laughed.

“Yes and no,” she responded. “I admit that we probably have caused a fair bit of trouble. But like I said, there were good reasons behind it. The local people were suffering on account of the heavy tolls and taxes being imposed on them. I’ve no problem with gems being traded with foreign powers. I just resent it when most of the money from those trades is going to people who don’t deserve to have it. That’s all.”

“Well, it doesn’t look like Sairou has any problems trading.” Suzuno turned her gaze back to the window. “I don’t think I ever saw so many different kinds of people, either. I know Sairou is full of different tribes and clans — isn’t that what you said? But even so…”

“Sairou is the most clan-based land, because it was built up that way in the first instance,” Toroki came to join her at the window. “In the beginning there were a group of families who established themselves with power bases in different regions of the country. They weren’t one people, then, and they considered themselves independant. Then one of those families had a leader who decided that it would be better for all of the provinces to unite and share their resources. Other lands like Kutou and Hokkan were growing in influence at this time, so I suppose people here felt threatened.”

“So they got together and formed Sairou?” Suzuno asked, and Toroki shook her head.

“Where men and swords are concerned, it’s never so simple,” she replied. “There was a lot of fighting and many people died. Several of these tribes were divided between support for unification and animosity towards it. But in the end, it was the only possible result if any of Sairou’s peoples were going to survive potential invasion.”

“I see.” Suzuno looked sombre. “I guess major things have to be settled by force, in this world?”

“I wish it wasn’t that way, but certainly history seems to indicate it,” Toroki sighed. “Fighting isn’t my preference at all, but men will be men, and that’s all I can say about it. They like their weapons far too much.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Suzuno pursed her lips. “So these families were

defeated?"

"No. The sensible ones quashed their rebels and united with what is now the Royal house," Toroki responded. "They were the Han-ke, the Ueke-ke, the Kei-ke and the Tsuonie-ke. Any others were suppressed and scattered, and I don't know what became of them."

"So everyone in Sairou is related to one of those families?"

"No. Those are the ruling families," Toroki replied. "Beneath them are sub-families and ordinary people of various tribes who chose not to fight in the understanding they could keep their ordinary lives and not be affected by the shifts in power. Of these, the most prominent are Funoki, in the north, Yuusha in the south, Yaminzoku, in the mountains, Zanji in the West, Hin, in the East, Bakuzoku, on the Hokkan border, and Gaeru, in the desert. Although the current royal family have a lot of Yuusha blood, they would probably not admit to it. Most of the noble families have some anticedents in one or other of the tribes, I imagine. But the Royal House has long since dispensed with any family names. They are simply the Imperial family, and that is that."

"It's all very confusing," Suzuno sighed. "I'll never remember all of that."

"You don't need to." Toroki grinned. "I was just telling you, since you asked."

She stretched, stifling a yawn.

"Of course, if we go to Arudo, you'll realise why the tribes were the sane ones and the noble families the fools," she added. "Becoming involved in politics is nothing but trouble, take it from me."

"You really don't want to go, do you?" Suzuno asked, and Toroki shook her head.

"No," she said shortly. "But we will."

"First we have to speak to Dourin-san, and find out if she truly is Subaru," Suzuno reflected. "If she is, we have to convince her to come with us, too. Are you certain it's her, Toroki?"

"Yes," Toroki nodded. "Can't you sense it? She has a strong aura about her — there's no mistaking it."

"I'm not like you," Suzuno sighed. "I can't feel anything at all, except hot and cold."

She got to her feet, stifling a shiver and reaching for her shawl, wrapping it around her shoulders.

“There’s a chill breeze coming off the sea,” she added, “and this window doesn’t shut right.”

“You’re particular,” Toroki looked amused. “This isn’t a bad room, considering how busy the city is with traders and other things.”

“I can’t help it,” Suzuno defended herself. “It’s not the same, at home.”

“Well, in that case, let’s head downstairs and see if we can find some breakfast,” Toroki suggested. “We might speak to Dourin-san, if she’s working this morning, and I think it’d be better if we put things to her without Tokaki. He might be enough to put her off, if he gawps at her the way he did yesterday.”

“Good point,” Suzuno grimaced. “All right. But since I came here, he and Tatara-san have both been up with the sun. They usually have to wake me up — so most likely they’re already downstairs before us. Tatara-san is a gentleman, so he wouldn’t disturb us if he thought we were still resting.”

“Tatara is of noble blood, even if he doesn’t live that life now,” Toroki reflected.

“So are you, if you come to that,” Suzuno pointed out, and Toroki snorted.

“Some nobility,” she murmured, a clouded look entering her emerald eyes. “No, Suzuno. Even though the Tsuonie-ke and the Han-ke are now inter-linked, I think there’s still far more honour and chivalry to be found on the Tsuonie side than on the Han one. I know I’m speaking ill of my own kin to talk like this — but if you understood the things I do, you’d not call them a noble house at all.”

“Toroki.” Suzuno frowned, and Toroki shrugged her shoulders.

“In any case, let’s go,” she suggested, taking Suzuno by the hand and giving her a little tug. “We shouldn’t be wasting time here, when we still have so much to do.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Suzuno protested. “You’re really kind of bossy, you know that?”

“Yes,” Toroki agreed calmly. “Daiyu’s told me so since we were tiny, in fact. It’s just part of who I am — I’m sorry, you’ll just have to deal with it.”

“Daiyu?” Suzuno’s brow creased in confusion. “Who’s Daiyu?”

Toroki froze, eying her companion in consternation.

“Why do you ask that, all of a sudden?” she demanded, her grip on Suzuno’s hand tightening, and Suzuno pulled her fingers back, sending her

companion a reproachful glare.

"Don't break my fingers! You were the one who said it. You said Daiyu'd told you so. Who's Daiyu? You haven't said that name before."

Toroki looked stricken, chewing down hard on her lip. Then she sighed.

"You'll find out, soon enough," she said at length. "It doesn't matter, not for now. We have too much to do, Suzuno. Come on."

She pulled open the door, and, realising her newest ally was not about to enlarge on the matter any further, Suzuno sighed, obediently following the older woman out of the chamber and down the stairs towards the inn's small solar.

"But that was a strange look in her eyes, just then," she mused. "As if somehow I'd stuck a knife in her and turned it really hard. I wonder… was he a lover? Or something like that? Maybe that's why she's so adamantly against me falling in love while I'm here. If she'd had a bad experience, I'd understand why she was so negative."

She glanced at Toroki's tense form.

"We still barely know each other. Even though she told me her real name, I need to remember that it doesn't mean I know everything," she acknowledged. "I really have to be careful. I trust her — I want to, anyway, like I do Tatara-san and Tokaki. I think I can, and she doesn't seem dangerous. But there are still gaps. And I suppose… I should fill those gaps before I let my guard down completely."

The solar was almost empty when they arrived, most of the guests being traders who had already left for their day's work in the city. By a corner window, the two male members of Byakko's party were seated, deep in discussion about something or other, and as the girls drew closer, Suzuno picked up the thread of the conversation.

"I'm telling you, Kasaru, leave it to me. If that chick's really Subaru, then I'll get her along for the ride for sure. Can you doubt me? This is my speciality. It's no problem. Piece of cake."

"Tokaki." Suzuno pursed her lips, marching up to him and making him jump by clapping her hands down on his shoulders. "What are you deciding without asking us? This isn't about your interest in women — didn't we already tell you that?"

"Suzuno!" Tokaki stared at her, abashed. "When did you appear? I thought you and Toroki were still doing whatever it is you chicks do first thing in the morning."

"I believe it's called washing and dressing." Toroki perched herself on

the end of the seat opposite, sending Tokaki a winning smile. "But you're an expert on women, so you'll know all about it."

"Shit, shut up," Tokaki reddened. "You weren't supposed to be eavesdropping. And I was only saying how I've got experience in these things. That Dourin girl's a hot catch. And we need her, right? So it stands to reason I should be the one to lure her in."

"I don't think that luring anyone is a strategy we should use," Tatara said pensively. "Tokaki, I'm serious. Even if you are taken with this girl, this isn't our place. We aren't the ones who should be recruiting stellar warriors. That's Suzuno-sama's job. It's her that we flock to. Not each other."

"Are you saying I couldn't do it?" Tokaki looked wounded, and Tatara laughed, shaking his head.

"Knowing you how I do, my friend, I wouldn't be surprised if you could," he acknowledged. "I just think that, since this is about Byakko, it should be Suzuno who makes the approach."

"We think so too," Toroki shot Tokaki a pointed look. "If for no other reason than your inane mumblings might scare the girl off once and for all. Whatever you were thinking — if you were thinking anything — when we saw her last night, we don't need a repeat of it. The last thing we want her to think is that we're a bumbling group of idiots who harbour random perverts in our midst."

"Fine," Tokaki folded his arms, dropping back in his seat with a disgruntled look on his face. "Do what you like. I won't offer my services again. But don't blame me if it doesn't work out the first time."

"I really don't know how I should approach her," Suzuno admitted. "I haven't had to approach anyone, yet. You three all sort of came to me, in one way or another. I have no idea if Dourin-san even knows she is Subaru, or what her mark is. I don't know anything at all."

"Just be straight with her," Tatara advised. "Honesty is the best strategy when trying to win someone's trust."

Before any of the others could answer, the door swung open to reveal the subject of their conversation, a tray under her arm as she glanced around the solar. At the sight of them, she bowed her head, pale curls falling over her shoulder as she did so, and despite himself, Tokaki swallowed hard.

"She'd better damn well come with us," he muttered, in a voice just loud enough for his companions to hear. "Else I'm staying here. Dammit, of course she's one of Byakko's. Do you think any ordinary wench could be

made up like that?"

"All right. I think that's proof enough that Tokaki should shut up and stay out of it." Toroki sent him a warning glance, and Tokaki grimaced.

"What? Didn't we just agree that honesty is the best policy?" he demanded. "Besides, you're pretty too, Toroki. Just because you're not stacked like that Dourin chick is doesn't mean you're any less attractive, you know."

"I might just slap you," Toroki eyed him contemplatively, "if you carry on like that."

"Shh, both of you!" Suzuno begged, as she watched the young inn employee carefully gathering up the empty glasses and mugs that dotted around the room. "This is our chance to speak to her — let me concentrate a little, at least."

She got to her feet, smoothing her skirt nervously, then carefully she crossed the floor to where Dourin had just finished clearing a cluster of used glasses.

"Dourin-san, may I speak to you a moment, please?" she asked hesitantly, and at the sound of her voice, the girl paused, setting down the last mug and wiping her hands on her apron as she met the Miko's earnest gaze with quizzical, playful aqua eyes.

"Of course, o-kyakusama," she agreed. "How can I help? You and your companions haven't yet had breakfast, have you? Would you like me to…"

"I'm sorry, but it really isn't anything to do with the inn or breakfast or anything like that," Suzuno said, her cheeks blazing red as she stumbled over her words. "It's just that… we wanted to talk to you. All of us, but… especially me. About something else."

Dourin's brows knitted together, and she frowned, glancing from Suzuno to the group still sconced in their corner. At length, she smiled.

"I can interpret that kind of conversation from here," She reflected, her gaze settling on Tokaki for the briefest of minutes. "Your desert friend seems to want to speak to me, also — I'm in demand all of a sudden, aren't I?"

"My desert…?" Suzuno looked confused, then her eyes widened and she shook her head.

"No! No, it's not what you think. Or at least, maybe it is, from him, but not me. I mean, I didn't come to pass on any kind of message from any guy. It's not like that."

“Really?” Dourin looked genuinely surprised, and Suzuno nodded.

“He’s kind of hopeless,” she admitted sheepishly, “but it’s not about that. I mean, the reason we wanted to speak to you is about something else. About… about the Tiger of the West. Byakko.”

“Byakko?” Dourin bit her lip, folding her arms acoss her chest. “I see.”

To Suzuno, the girl’s gesture had seemed suddenly defensive, and belatedly she remembered Toroki’s words about the turmoil within the Western lands.

Inwardly she made up her mind. Tatara had said honesty was the best mode of attack.

“My name is Oosugi Suzuno,” She said at length. “My friends are Tokaki, Tatara and Toroki. We’re Byakko’s people and we came to Kaidou looking for another member of our group. We think that person is you, Dourin-san. We think you might be Byakko’s warrior, Subaru. And because of it…”

“Byakko’s people?” Dourin blinked, then she let out a merry peal of laughter. “In a trading inn like this? Well, I’ve been called a few things in my life, but that’s the first time I’ve been called any kind of holy avenger!”

“You don’t believe me.” Suzuno’s heart sank in her chest. “But it’s true — I swear it is. I mean, I can’t prove I’m Byakko no Miko. I don’t know how. But I can prove who my companions are. Each of them has a white mark to prove it. And… and we think you have one, too.”

“Why would you think that?” Dourin demanded, and to Suzuno’s eyes it looked like the girl’s expression had become more wary. “I told you. I’m a tavern girl. No more, no less. I work here to earn my keep, and that’s all.”

“Dourin-san…”

“Even if, by some fluke, I was the person you were looking for, it would be difficult for me to leave Kaidou,” Dourin continued evenly, glancing across towards the window. “This is my home, and I’ve worked hard to support myself since my Mother and I came back here. I don’t know if it would be right to leave… considering the fact that she can’t.”

“Your mother?” Suzuno’s ears pricked up. “Oh! Is that it? Are you supporting your family by working here, Dourin-san? Is that why you don’t want to leave?”

“My situation isn’t really your concern,” Dourin told her, though there was no edge to her words, and she offered Suzuno a smile. “I just think you’re mistaken. That’s all. I’ve no real mind to start risking my life fighting battles and roaming the countryside like homeless nomads looking

for shelter."

She shrugged.

"I've played host to enough traders from the Northern country, and heard my fill of their legend," she added. "It sounds like a lot of hassle, to be honest. And I didn't work my fingers to the bone in order to lose everything on a whim."

Suzuno frowned, quelling the flash of indignation that briefly stirred within her. She took a deep breath, then shook her head.

"If you don't do anything, you will lose everything," she said firmly. "Even if you think it's crazy, or a hassle, or any of those things. Bad things are happening and so it might be dangerous. But if we don't do something, noone else can or will. And if we don't, Sairou will be doomed. I know that it's true, even if I don't know everything about what I have to do yet. And I need you, Dourin-san. We need you. All of us. On our side."

"I haven't even admitted to being the one you need, yet."

"No, I know. But you are, aren't you?" Suzuno eyed her earnestly. "Because the way you're talking, you're trying to speak hypothetically. But you're not, are you? You do have a mark. And you know what it is, even if you say you don't."

Dourin eyed her thoughtfully.

"You're smarter than you look," she acknowledged. "But it doesn't change anything. If I leave here, I leave everything I've worked for and wind up with nothing whatever happens. Being Byakko's doesn't pay bills or feed me. And what about after the God's raised? Providing we're alive, what then?"

"I don't know," Suzuno confessed. "I don't know any of that. I just know that if we don't help people, nobody else will. And that's why we came here. To speak to you."

She tilted her head on one side.

"What about your mother? Don't you want to protect her, too?"

Dourin stared, then she laughed, shaking her head.

"My mother died eighteen months ago," she said frankly. Suzuno frowned.

"But you said…"

"I said it would be wrong for me to leave, since she can't," Dourin spread her hands. "And she can't. She's buried here, in Zanji clan soil, just

as she wanted. She's here forever, now. And that's why I stayed, I suppose. Because of that."

"I see," Suzuno sighed. "I'm sorry. I suppose I don't really understand how that feels. Even though my family are a long way away, they are alive and safe. I don't know what it's like to lose someone important to me."

Dourin's gaze softened, and she reached out to touch Suzuno's cheek.

"How old are you?" she asked gently, and Suzuno looked surprised.

"Sixteen. Why?"

"Only a year," Dourin murmured. "Yet it seems so much greater."

"Pardon me?"

"Nothing," Dourin grinned, shaking her head. "I was just considering how different we are, even though we're only a year apart. That's all."

She sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

"I suppose if a kid like you is willing to risk life and limb to save this land, I oughtn't stand back and be lazy about doing my bit, either," she said resignedly.

"Does that mean you'll come with us? You'll help?" Hope flared in Suzuno's heart, and Dourin's lips twitched into a faint smile.

"I've had Subaru's mark on my chest since I became a woman," she responded. "It's not in a place I can easily show you without exciting your friend over there, so you'll have to take my word for it. But I am who you think I am. And in truth, your openness makes me ashamed. I've come to think of myself so much in the last few years. Insular, if you like. My mother and I were the only ones that mattered, and when she died, my focus was on surviving and making good by myself. But Byakko did brand me, and if you're so desperate for my help, I can't walk away."

Her brows knitted together.

"Heaven knows there's enough heresy already plaguing this land without me turning my back on my duty," she added.

"Even here?" Suzuno asked. "Kaidou seems really busy and happy and settled… is it not like that at all?"

"Kaidou is a long way from the capital," Dourin acknowledged. "But even so, with all the traders, people from the East are constantly coming here and people from the West — converts — are joining them. It's a strange manner of things, to be honest. I've always kept out of matters like that, if I could. But it's not a good feeling. Whatever this new faith is, it

seems somewhat dark and vengeful to me."

"Toroki's said that, too," Suzuno nodded. "It's an evil heresy that's trying to displace Byakko in Sairou."

"Well, I don't know about evil," Dourin spread her hands. "But I do know that there have been people in search of Byakko's chosen for a while now. What reason they have, I don't know. But somehow it doesn't seem a very innocent way of enquiring, so I've always kept my mouth shut. I've served a few court envoys who've come this way thinking that the coast is a good bolthole for people to conceal themselves, but they always go away empty-handed."

"That's why you weren't willing to admit straight away who you were?" Suzuno asked, and Dourin laughed.

"I have good judgement," she said frankly. "I know what kind of people hunt down Celestial Warriors. They're not people with innocent eyes like yours, Byakko no Miko-chan. I don't think you could tell a lie if your life depended on it — as perhaps it might, if you're really sure about following this path. Your honesty shines from you like a beacon. Otherwise I wouldn't have told you anything at all."

"I see," Suzuno pinkened. "I think that was a compliment. I think."

"Take it as one," Dourin chuckled. "Either way, haven't you done what you came to do? I'm going to infuriate my boss if I tell him that I'm going on a trip all of a sudden, so if you want me to come with you, we'll have to leave now, before he's up and around and worrying who's doing what."

"You're just going to leave without telling him?" Suzuno stared, and Dourin nodded.

"I think so," she agreed lightly. "He'll just think I've eloped with a client, most probably. He's bad at judging people on appearances, and he seems to think that mine makes me a likely candidate for an easy woman or a brothel whore."

She sighed, pulling a face.

"It took a long time for him to take me seriously and not tell me that I'd do better trying to get a job in a whorehouse," she added acidly. "If I leave here, I'll have to start all over again. I hope you realise that."

"I'm sorry," Suzuno looked guilty, but Dourin shook her head.

"You're the same. You're somewhere you shouldn't be because the Tiger called you," she reflected, patting her companion on the shoulder. "I told you. I know about Genbu's legend. I know the Miko comes from a different world to this one. And that's the other reason why I believed you. You

don't seem like a normal Sairou girl at all. Even dressed that way, you speak differently and there's something else about you. Maybe it's that innocence — I don't know. But you seem like the kind of person Byakko would choose. So I'm game to believe he did choose you, just like he did me."

"Are you really complimenting me?" Suzuno eyed her companion doubtfully, and Dourin laughed, slipping an arm around her shoulders and hugging her tightly.

"Of course I am," she assured her. "Well? I'm serious when I say that making our escape is probably best as soon as possible. So you'd better formally introduce me to your friends."

"All right," Suzuno gathered her wits, nodding her head. "Though, erm, before I do… please don't be offended by Tokaki. I mean, he's not really a pervert or anything like that. He's just…"

"A man," Dourin said simply. "It's all right. I'm well used to attracting male attention. With this body, it's almost impossible not to be noticed."

She offered a wry smile.

"I won't pretend I don't like attention, or use it to my advantage at times," she added. "But it can be a pain, too. People think that I'm for the taking, and they soon learn I'm not that kind of girl. Tokaki will learn that too, if he pushes too far. I'm not a meek and retiring kind of girl."

"No kidding," Suzuno murmured, and Dourin laughed.

"I like you," she decided. "Maybe it will be fun, travelling together — though I won't pretend you might not pick up bad habits from me along the way. If you really are so innocent as you seem, Suzuno-chan… there's probably a lot of things I'll be wanting to teach you."

At that moment they reached the rest of the group, and Tokaki was immediately on his feet, bowing his head towards Dourin with a wide grin plastered on his face.

"Dourin-san, good morning!" he said brightly. "Suzuno's spoken to you then, right? You're going to come with us, right?"

"So it would seem." Calmly Dourin extended an elegant hand, pressing her fingers to Tokaki's chest and pushing him gently back down into his seat with an effortless flick of her wrist. "You're Tokaki, I understand? One of Byakko's Seishi."

"Yes," Seeing that Tokaki was once more stuck for words, Tatara nodded his head. "I'm the warrior known as Tatara, and this is Toroki. You carry the mark of Subaru, correct?"

“I do,” Subaru’s brows knitted. “Do you call yourselves like that all the time? It must be pretty hard to be discreet, if you do. Don’t you have real names? You already know mine. I’m Wau Dourin, and I know that this is Oosugi Suzuno.”

“Hamu Ranva,” Tokaki found his tongue at this juncture, extending his hand to Dourin’s and she took it, squeezing it gently and then loosing it. “But you can call me Tokaki. It seems better that way.”

“Tsuonie Kasaru,” Tatara added. “But like Tokaki, it’s become easier to use our stellar names since we began this journey.”

“And you?” Dourin’s clever eyes flitted to Toroki, who smiled, shaking her head.

“Toroki is enough,” she said lightly. “There’s no need for me to be anyone else while I’m doing the Tiger’s bidding.”

“Hrm. You like to be the mysterious one, huh?” Dourin looked thoughtful. “Well, I suppose it’s fine.”

She grinned.

“In which case, I won’t buck the trend,” she added. “You can call me Subaru.”

“Dourin… no, Subaru-san said that we’d be better leaving quickly, in order to avoid her boss,” Suzuno added. “Apparently he might make it difficult if he knew she was going to quit.”

“Well, how abouts I teleport Subaru and I out of here, and you guys follow and meet us by the pier or something?” Tokaki suggested hopefully. “I think I can manage that kind of transfer, and surely there’s no hurry for all of us to leave. It’s Subaru who he’ll be chasing.”

“Tokaki.” Toroki sent him a warning look, and Tokaki looked hurt.

“What?” he demanded. “I was making a suggestion! I’m the only one who can teleport! Unless… Subaru, what kind of power do you have?”

“Maybe she doesn’t know, yet,” Tatara suggested. “Since we’ve only just come to find her.”

“No…” Subaru shook her head. “I do know. It’s just somewhat difficult to explain, and complicated, too. It’s easier to demonstrate, and there isn’t time for us to do it now.”

She cast Tokaki a smile.

“I’ll let you teleport me out of here,” She added, “but on one understanding.”

“Subaru-san?” Suzuno looked startled, as Tokaki’s golden eyes lit up.

“Name it,” He said frankly, a faint swagger in his voice. “Whatever you say is fine with me.”

Subaru’s smile widened.

“Lay one hand on me other than what you need to do to transfer us, and I’ll send you back to puberty,” She said calmly. “Don’t say you haven’t been warned.”

“Back to…” Suzuno stared, and Subaru let out a peal of merry laughter.

“I told you. My power is difficult to explain,” She responded airily. “But I mean it, Tokaki-kun. You can take me to the pier, but if you think of doing anything other than that, you’ll regret it. Trust me. You don’t want to make me angry.”

Tokaki swallowed hard, then he nodded his head, holding out his hands.

“I have to touch you to shift you,” he said slowly. “So take my hands. I won’t touch anything else, I promise.”

“Then we’ll see you at the pier,” Toroki said. “Tatara, you know Kaidou pretty well, don’t you? You’ll be able to find your way.”

“No problem,” Tatara agreed. “We’ll see you there shortly, Ranva.”

Tokaki nodded his assent, then, as his fingers closed around Subaru’s wrists, there was a glimmer of white light and the two of them disappeared.

“She’s kind of scary,” Suzuno murmured. “What did she mean, that she’d send him back to puberty? What kind of power does she have?”

“I guess we’ll find out soon enough, if she wasn’t bluffing,” Toroki reflected. “Shall we leave, then? Tatara, you have the coin, so you’ll have to pay the landlord on our way out.”

“I already left the remainder of the money with an employee first thing,” Tatara responded. “I anticipated that if we were going to approach Dourin… Subaru-san, we probably wouldn’t be staying another night.”

“That was good forward thinking.” Relief flickered in Suzuno’s expression. “In that case we should hurry and catch Tokaki and Subaru-san up, shouldn’t we?”

“For Tokaki’s sake, or for Subaru’s?” Toroki asked wryly, and despite herself, Suzuno giggled.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Either.”

“It strikes me that Tokaki might have finally met his match,” Tatara

observed ruefully, and Suzuno nodded.

"I think that too," she agreed. "And another thing. Even if she's a little scary, I think having Subaru-san along for the ride is going to be a lot of fun."

Chapter 14

Chapter Thirteen
Present Day: Kounan-koku

"So, you did decide to grace us with your presence at court after all, Chichiri."

Reizeitei stood from his seat behind the desk, casting his visitor a warm grin as he playfully bowed his head in the Seishi's direction. "I was beginning to think my invitation had fallen on deaf ears, since Ouba-hime and her party leave for the East tomorrow morning."

"My apologies." Chichiri returned the grin, shutting the door behind him and moving to join his companion, clasping the young man's hands warmly in his. "I can't think that you need my advice when it comes to entertaining a foreign royal. Surely there's nothing that a village apothecary can teach a prince who's been born and bred into his current role about something like that?"

"Yes, perhaps." Reizeitei nodded, pursing his lips for a moment as he took in his old friend's expression. "I wondered if you were cross with me, that's all."

"Cross?" Chichiri released his grasp, eying the Emperor in confusion. "Why would I be cross with you, Boushin-kun? You're one of my favourite people to visit. I've just been busy of late in the village, that's all. After Hikari left, some of the children managed to get themselves entangled in a briar patch and two of them at least were badly scratched. Even with Aidou's help, it was a cacophony of screaming, crying children, and parents who weren't a lot better."

"I see." Reizeitei chuckled. "Your own two weren't involved?"

"Eiju considers himself too grown up for those kind of games, now he's training to be a soldier." Chichiri responded ruefully. "And fortunately Meikyo knew better than to follow her playmates into the ravine. She also had the foresight to come and get me when the others got into trouble — so all in all, further disaster was averted. Children are children, that's all. Sometimes there's no helping them."

"Mm. Perhaps one day I will truly know what that means." Reizeitei mused pensively. "But no, I thought that you may have an objection to my having granted Hikari permission to travel to the East. I realise it was somewhat presumptuous, since you are officially her

guardian, but even so…"

"I was surprised that you'd agreed so easily." Chichiri admitted. "I'm quite glad that you did. We have friends in the East, and I think that it would be good for her, after spending eighteen months or so in Kounan, to travel a little more and see them."

"You're really not worried about her safety on such a trip?" Reizeitei questioned. "I have to admit that if she had not begged quite so hard, I might have been more reluctant, but I'm afraid I'm weak when it comes to Hikari's pleadings."

"Just like a true brother and sister, I think." Chichiri sounded amused. "I seem to remember something of the same thing, when my sister was still alive. It's very hard to refuse them anything, isn't it, when they look at you a certain way."

He spread his hands.

"The truth is that I am worried. Very worried." He said seriously, the humour dropping from his tone in an instant. "And I don't know yet whether or not I've made the right decision in not standing out against this. But Hikari is almost eighteen, now. In another year she may be out of my hands completely. I haven't seen any sign of her affection for Aoiketsu abating, and I know that he's more eager than ever to finalise their relationship into something permanent and lasting. Plus, I know she's stronger than she was when she first came here. I've taught her a lot in the time we've had, and she's also learnt from being at court. I suppose I'm hopeful that a trip to Kutou might help her to expand her horizons yet again."

He sighed.

"Besides, Myoume's baby is due soon, and Hikari misses her badly, too." He admitted. "I feel that in having to stay here, the girl's already made sacrifices enough. I shouldn't ask more sacrifices of her, when there's really no reason to keep her tied to the South. She is a very powerful young lady, if she chooses to use that power. She certainly has enough understanding of her skills now to defend herself from the attacks of ordinary thieves and rogues, of that I'm quite sure. And besides, Aoiketsu will be going with her. Where Hikari's concerned, Aoi has a quick blade and a lot of skill to back it up. So yes, I'm worried. But I can't always stand in her way. Taka and Miaka would want me to think that way, so I'm trying to, even if my instinct is to protect her at all costs."

"I see. So it's a struggle between the surrogate parent who wants to let the child fly freely, and the Seishi who wants to defend the

Shinzahou from falling into enemy hands?" Reizeitei asked, and Chichiri nodded.

"Exactly that." He said cheerfully. "But Aidou and I discussed it carefully, and she feels even more strongly than I do that there was no point in Hikari having raised Seiryuu and brought peace if we weren't going to let her enjoy the fruits of her labours. If she goes to Kutou, she can see Myoume and Hyoushin and perhaps the new baby, if her timing is right. So I've agreed. And since you have, too, that's that. She travelled on far more dangerous journeys when she first came here. I think she has a charm about her that will keep her safe."

"Aoi isn't so keen." Reizeitei admitted, and Chichiri smiled.

"Of course." He acknowledged. "But he's been wise enough not to argue with either of us, this time. He has even more reason to protect Hikari than I do."

He leant casually back against the wall.

"There is another reason I came to court today, however." He added frankly. "And another reason I've given Hikari permission to go to the East. You'll think I'm crazy, perhaps, but I can't help thinking that there's something in the air. It's something distinctive, and faintly familiar — yet till now I couldn't one hundred percent put my finger on what that thing is. All I knew was that there's been some kind of spiritual shift in the past week or so, and it's very definitely shaping itself into something. The only clue I had to any of it was hovering around Kounan's palace, so I came here to see if I could get to the bottom of my suspicions."

"That made no sense whatsoever." Reizeitei said bluntly, and Chichiri laughed.

"I suppose it didn't." he admitted. "All right. Let me see if I can explain. Some nights ago there was a storm, and Hikari and I both felt there was something in the air. It seems that Shishi felt it too, through her connection with Genbu's mage, so it can't be imagination. However, what that sensation was, none of us were sure."

"Hikari said something about that to Aoi and I, come to think of it." Reizeitei remembered. "That there was something in the air and that she thought it might have some connection to Ouba-hime coming to Sairou. Is that why you're here? Because if you're going to spiritually prod at my guests, Chichiri…"

"Give me a little credit." Chichiri reproached him lightly. "No. I'm not going to do anything so indelicate. But I am curious to meet the

Sairou party. So since they leave tomorrow, tonight seems my best chance to do just that."

"Well, I'd like you to meet them, whatever your motives." Reizeitei reflected. "I don't have the spiritual senses you have, or even that my father may once have had, long before I was born. But I find Ouba-hime a pleasant enough individual, and her companion, Kinka, an intelligent, capable young girl. The third member of the party, their guardsman Sayo I have had less to do with — but from the reports my commanders have submitted, he seems honest and open, the kind of man who would put himself on an enemy's blade to defend his mistress from harm. All in all they seem in keeping with the kind of people I expect from our allies to the West. I have a good amount of respect for Heiboutei-sama and his son has a growing reputation as a strong fighter and wise politician. It is little surprise to me that Ouba-hime should be an equally talented young woman."

"You don't regret not having put in for her hand yourself, I trust?" Chichiri teased, and Reizeitei laughed, shaking his head.

"Of course not." He said pragmatically. "What benefit would it be to me to have an Emperor as my father in law? All it could do is unsettle the stability of Kounan and rock its traditions. I will take a wife in the same way as my father took my mother before me. From the people of the South."

"Well said." Chichiri chuckled. "And I'm glad to hear it, too. You have a wise head on your shoulders too, Boushin-kun. Whether you realise it or not, yet, you do."

"Chichiri, whatever it is you've felt in the atmosphere… it isn't going to hurt Kounan, is it?" Reizeitei asked anxiously, and Chichiri spread his hands.

"I don't know." He said honestly. "But if it's what I think it is… I suspect not. I don't think it has much to do with us at all, to be quite honest. I think it's as Hikari says — it relates to Sairou."

"And so the only reason you've felt it here is because the Princess and her companions are here?"

"Most likely." Chichiri agreed.

"Given that, then, is it safe for Hikari to be going with them on the morrow?"

"Given that, I think it's imperative she does." Chichiri nodded. "Reizeitei-sama, if I tell you my suspicions, you must give me your absolute word not to mention them to a living soul. Not Hikari, not

Aoi, not even your Lady Mother. Because I may yet be wrong… it's just that there are flickers of energy here that feel very like something I've encountered before — twenty years apart, yet still… familiar."

"I promise." Reizeitei said soberly. "As an Emperor, I give you my word. I would rather know, Chichiri, why it is you seek to involve Suzaku's Shinzahou in whatever it is you think is on the horizon."

"Twenty years ago now, Tasuki and I and our other companions fought to gain the treasures of Genbu and Byakko in order to try and raise Suzaku and save Kounan." Chichiri moved across to the window, resting his hands gently on the sill as he gazed out across the palace grounds towards the private royal gardens. "We failed, but in the process we encountered three individuals who had lived beyond a hundred, holding out, perhaps, for our coming to the West."

"Individuals?" Reizeitei frowned. "Byakko's people, you mean?"

"Exactly." Chichiri nodded. "Tatara, who guarded the Shinzahou and died fighting Miboshi in the Shrine that no longer stands. And his companions Subaru and Tokaki, who assisted us in many many ways. Of course, their chi has long since disappeared from the West, too. In my travels since then I ascertained that there were no more living spirits with Byakko's blood running through them."

He turned, offering the Emperor a crooked smile.

"Then, eighteen months ago, I encountered the same sensation again." He continued. "I was very slow on the uptake, this time. It had been such a long time, and I didn't make the connection. Even when Myoume became such an integral part of our operation, it didn't immediately occur to me that her brother Miramu was also one of those marked with Byakko's kanji. Yet when I think back on it, both Myoume and Miramu had flickers of the same sensation running through them. The pulse of holy magic — the Tiger's magic. It's something unique to Seishi — Tasuki and I both have it, though ours is the blood of the Phoenix, so has a different scent. That's why I'm sure that it's Byakko that's stirring here in Eiyou. If it was just a residue of Hotohori-sama's chi, or something Hikari or Tasuki or I had started, it would be Suzaku's essence I'd be picking up. It's not. It's very clearly Byakko's spirit that's echoing through this place."

"Meaning what?" Reizeitei looked startled. "That there's a warrior of Byakko right here in Eiyou?"

"That would be my hypothesis, yes." Chichiri agreed. "But what it means I don't know. Perhaps because Miramu was killed, another has been woken in order to take on his role — though with both the

Shinzahou and the relic of Kitora missing, I can't imagine what purpose the Tiger would have with reviving another of his people. Equally, since Miramu *is* dead, I can't see it being something bigger — yet it concerns me. It concerns me a good deal. And Kutou is a nation who is only just finding peace and security."

He smiled.

"I don't know, yet, whether Byakko's chosen knows of their strength or whether they don't." He added. "I also don't know whether their being here is a coincidence of fate or whether it's something bigger. But I think that, if Hikari goes with them, it might be that she can be of some help. Myoume is her ally and given that fact, if she's so closely involved with one of Byakko's people, the chances are she'll be able to make allies of any others. Including the one who's currently here."

"You think that, even though Miramu was killed, there might be more to this, don't you?" Reizeitei said sharply, and Chichiri nodded.

"Possibly, though I have no basis for thinking so." He responded. "But like I said, it has little to do with Kounan at all. If this relates to Byakko, it relates to Sairou. And the best thing for us would be to maintain that long-term positive relationship with the West and keep out of it as much as we can. That's Hikari's role. Even she doesn't realise it, but her natural ability to make friends is probably something that's likely to keep the peace in the event of any trouble or conflict. , it might just be a case of Miramu's spirit needing replacing. But if it isn't… the Seishi are only awoken in times of crisis. And if something bad is about to hit Sairou…"

"Then politically we'd do well to tread carefully." Reizeitei's eyes narrowed. "Thank you, Chichiri. It hasn't put my mind at rest at all where Hikari's safety is concerned, but nonetheless I am grateful for your counsel. Even if we are theorising about things which are unlikely, the possibility must still be considered. Seven and a half years ago, when Kounan almost fell into ruin, the resurrected souls of your Seishi brethren were called to arms even in their child forms. It can't be ignored that there are roles for Seishi even beyond the original summoning of the God. We have no way of knowing how many times a land may call a Miko. Whether it be once, or whether it be many times."

"Exactly." Chichiri nodded soberly. "And if it did come to it that Byakko's protection was needed to save Sairou afresh, well, with Amefuri dead, it struck me that they will probably *need* a Shinzahou in order to complete the summoning. Hikari is the only one who hasn't

been spirited away from this world, and it occured to me that maybe that's the reason she's had to stay here. Maybe it's deeper than just the changes in her own body, but that, in some way, she's going to be part of another miracle."

"Either way, I see your reasoning for sending her to Myoume." Reizeitei let out his breath in a rush. "As ever, I'll trust your opinion. If anyone understands Byakko's ways, it's that woman — and if something's amiss, she'll be the first to pick it up."

"My thoughts precisely." Chichiri replied. "But I'd rather Hikari didn't know that any of this was being discussed. Without any evidence, there's no reason to make her or Aoi wary, or to weaken the friendships she's forming with the Princess and her companion. I think they are valuable friendships to have, even if nothing bad does happen in the West… and I won't do anything to harm that chance."

"Nor will I." Reizeitei said firmly. "Don't worry. I won't mention it to anyone. I told you — you have my word."

"And I value it." Chichiri smiled. "Scheming behind their backs is somewhat underhanded, but sometimes… its a necessity. And as I said, Hikari's no longer a child. She has to stand up for herself at some point — now seems to be a good time to test how much she's learnt since she came here permanently."

He cast a glance out towards the gardens once more, then,

"Her spirit is very unsettled, isn't it?" He murmured. "The Princess, I mean. I can feel her distress from here."

"Distress?" Reizeitei blinked. "What do you mean? She smiles and laughs often enough, when I'm in her company."

"Outwardly, perhaps." Chichiri frowned. "But inwardly her heart is crying. It's a strong, almost overpowering sensation, Heika."

He glanced at his hands.

"Perhaps now would be as good a time as any to introduce myself and provide her with a distraction." He reflected. "I sense tension in the air — tension between her and her companion, and it would be no good for them to leave this place on negative terms with one another. It's a long journey."

He smiled, offering the Emperor a lop-sided wink.

"I'll stick around for the meal and festivities tonight, I promise." he added. "And I'll be on my best behaviour then, don't worry."

With that he brought his hands up in front of his face, disappearing into a puff of smoke, and Reizeitei frowned, slowly shaking his head.

“That’s the least of my worries.” He muttered, his own gaze flitting towards the gardens. “Chichiri, you’re right, I know you are… but I really hope that if Hikari’s about to get involved in something dangerous, she’s as strong as you believe she is!”

“Tomorrow morning we’ll be leaving Kounan, won’t we?”

Ouba pulled her wrap more tightly around her shoulders, stepping carefully down into the palace gardens as she turned to cast her companion a faint smile. “It’s sort of sad, don’t you think so, Kinka? We’ve been here such a short time, really. I never realised how friendly and relaxed court was in the South — but tonight will be our last night as guests of Reizeitei-sama and his companions. We’ll be back to the road — and heading to Shunhou at dawn.”

“We will.” Kinka agreed, leaning back against the trunk of a sturdy sakura tree and nodding her head. “To be honest, I’ll be glad to be moving again. I don’t like being half-way like this — there’s so far still to go.”

“You want to leave?” Ouba looked startled. “Do you feel unsafe, then, here in Eiyou?”

“Not in the slightest.” Kinka assured her. “Everyone here has greeted us as though we’re long lost friends or family, and I can’t fault any part of it. But it’s just that your Lord Brother entrusted me with your safety above all things on the trip to Shunhou. When we get to Kutou, I can relinquish that part of my duty a little and worry about being your companion and friend a lot more than I will being your protector. It’s a lot of pressure, to protect a Princess in a foreign land. And I’d be happier if we didn’t hesitate any further. That’s all.”

“You want to know what we’re going to find in the East, don’t you?” Ouba reflected, and Kinka nodded.

“Yes.” She admitted. “Because I hear so many conflicting reports of Kutou that it puts me on edge. This court is not the issue. There’s no malice lurking in the shadows here. But we still don’t know much about there.”

“What about Kaiga-dono?” Ouba bent down to pick a delicate yellow blossom from a blooming plant, slipping it into her hair as she cast her companion a grin. “You’ve spent a lot of time discussing the route with him. Hasn’t he told you anything about what we’re to expect?”

“Gossip, you mean?” Kinka’s eyes lit up with amusement, and she shrugged. “I’m not sure. Kaiga-dono is a very smart individual, and I don’t know one hundred percent whether or not he’s on our side or simply acting for his Emperor in all of this. Still, that may yet prove to be in our interests, too. He seems very honest, and he’s told me quite frankly many things about himself and his position in Kutou’s administrative hierarchy. I’d like to think he was someone we could trust in.”

“Hikari’s said he’s a strong fighter, too.” Ouba remembered. “Which means that it won’t just be on you to protect us. Sayo and Kaiga-dono will be there too.”

“Hikari now, is it?” Kinka eyed her mistress in interest. “You’ve dropped all formality completely, then, have you? I don’t think I’ve ever known you to befriend anyone quite so quickly — are you sure you’re not being intoxicated by the relaxed atmosphere? Letting down your guard makes my job harder, you know — stop and think about that a while, will you, before you give your all to a relative stranger?”

“You make it sound inappropriate, to befriend anyone on our journey.” Ouba objected. “I know you’ve always spoken frankly to me, but even so…”

“I’m sorry.” Kinka held up her hands. “I’m naturally suspicious, that’s all. I can’t help it. You’re important to me. And whenever I stop and remember that, I hear Nefuru-sama’s voice echoing in my ears. He’s worrying about you too — and I can’t let him down.”

“I wonder if he received my message.” Ouba reflected. “Reizeitei-sama said that his messengers would get it to Arudo within a couple of days, and I believe he means what he says. I hope that he and Sashi and Shinju are well, and everything in Sairou is going on as it should be. I know I won’t hear back from them until we reach our destination — but I at least wanted to tell them that I was fine.”

“I’m sure they were relieved to hear it.” Kinka agreed. “That you’ve at least got half-way with no serious mishaps.”

“Well, I didn’t tell them about what happened in Hengei, so that’s the view they’ll have.” Ouba rested her hands on the brick wall, letting out a sigh as she remembered the chaos of the Shunsai and the resultant fire. “I thought it best to follow your advice and leave all reference out of my communication. I don’t understand what happened completely, so I don’t think there’s a point in them knowing about it. In the end, , we all made it through safely.”

“I’m glad you didn’t write about it.” Relief flickered in Kinka’s eyes.

“As you said, there’s no point in dwelling on the things that are past.”

Ouba eyed her companion carefully, and Kinka frowned, pursing her lips.

“Is something wrong?”

“Only that I wish you’d tell me, if something happened in Hengei.” Ouba said softly. “You can trust me, can’t you? I’d rather know than not. Something happened — something unusual — and I want to know what it was. We’re friends, Kinka, and you said you’d never lie to me. Why won’t you tell me what happened on our trip?”

Kinka’s eyes clouded, and she shook her head.

“There’s a promise I have which supercedes the one I made to you.” She said frankly, raising her gaze to meet the Princess’s curious seiran eyes. “That’s all. I’m sorry, Hime. It’s how it is. I gave Rouhei-sama my word not to disclose information without the discretion of my Prince and that includes telling you. Even if it means you’re cross with me — I have to uphold my word. I swore my loyalty to Nefuru-sama by my blood, .”

“True, but even so…” Ouba’s eyes narrowed. “That means you do know what happened, then, doesn’t it? Then Hikari was right. You did have something to do with it.”

“Hikari?” Kinka’s eyes opened wide in shock, and she took a step back from her companion. “Ouba-hime — you told a *foreigner* about it? About the incident you won’t even disclose to your family back home in Arudo? Why would you do that — what benefit is there to tell someone who wasn’t there and who has no interest in it whatsoever?”

“It just happened.” Ouba spread her hands. “Hikari is easy to talk to, and she understands a lot of things that I’ve been feeling. Besides, because she’s not associated with it, I thought it would be all right to ask her opinion. She knows a lot about strange things, . It’s bothering me a lot, if you want to know the truth. We should have been burnt to death, but we weren’t. And I didn’t see what happened. But *you* did see — you *know*. And you won’t tell me, which hurts.”

“And you confided in a stranger, which hurts me, too.” Kinka said softly, pain in her vivid eyes. “I’m sorry, Hime, but I don’t see the justification. Whether you are or are not pleased with my answer, I still have a reason for not giving it. Whereas…”

Ouba’s eyes hardened.

“I am Princess Ouba of Sairou.” She said coolly. “If I want to ask someone’s opinion on something, Kinka, it’s not your place to reproach me. I am the one who makes that decision. Not you.”

Kinka faltered, a stricken look entering her gaze, and at the sight of it, Ouba bit her lip, immediately regretting the coldness of her words.

“I’m sorry.” She said quietly. “But I *like* Hikari. And I trust her. She’s been kind to me. And that’s all.”

Kinka pursed her lips, a mixture of emotions flooding through her expression. Then, without a word, she dropped to her knees before the princess in a formal bow.

“Forgive my presumptuousness, Ouba-hime.” She said softly, her tones reflecting the same stiff formality as her gesture, and a pang shot through Ouba’s heart as she registered the distance her closest companion had just put between them. “I have spoken out of turn.”

“Kinka…” Ouba swallowed hard, reaching down to take her friend by the hand. Kinka did not resist, but nor did she welcome the touch, and as Ouba pulled her companion to her feet, she was aware of the reticence that still lingered in her friend’s gaze.

“I’m the one who should apologise.” The Princess said frankly. “I shouldn’t have snapped at you. You were only giving me your opinion.”

“I am the daughter of the Kei clan, and you are the daughter of the Emperor.” Kinka said gravely, her eyes clouded as she shook her head. “I have forgotten, that’s all, that there is distinction between us. You are right, Hime. I have no just grounds to reproach you on anything.”

“Kinka, stop it.” Ouba begged, tears glittering in her seiran eyes. “Stop doing this — stop acting like this! Even if it is true — even if we do have different social standing — I don’t want you to stop being my friend as well as my companion! You’re the only true friend I have in this strange place — are you going to abandon me too?”

Kinka was silent for a moment, then, very slowly, she bowed her head towards her mistress.

“I will do everything in my power to protect and preserve your safety on the trip to Shunhou.” She said soberly. “As befits my duty to the Princess of Sairou. Excuse me, Ouba-hime. We leave tomorrow and I have much to still attend to.”

With that she was gone, disappearing through the bushes towards the palace, and Ouba stared after her, tears trickling down her cheeks

as she interpreted her friend's cold behaviour.

"I hurt her." She murmured, sinking down onto the bench and burying her head in her hands. "My truest friend and I spoke out of turn. I've always welcomed Kinka's honestly and frankness, and I don't like it when she's like this. But I was the one who put the space between us. I was the one who pulled rank over her… and I've hurt Kinka's pride by doing so."

"Tears shouldn't be shed in this place, you know. This garden is a place of happy memories, not sad ones, ."

A voice startled her attention and she jerked her head up, confusion flooding her features as she met the gaze of a stranger. At her discomfiture he smiled, bowing his head towards her. The gesture was light and casual, yet somehow Ouba did not feel offended by the manner of it, and she frowned, staring at the newcomer as she tried to work out who he was and where he had come from. A moment earlier, she knew, she had been all alone in the garden — yet there was no denying that the person who stood before her was as real as she was.

He was in his late thirties or early forties, Ouba guessed, with long, raggedy hair pulled back in a tail at the nape of his neck. He was dressed in rural clothes, without any of the fancy trimmings that might mark him out as an Imperial Representative or member of Kounan's court, yet somehow he did not seem out of place within the most secluded of royal gardens. To all intents and purposes he had the appearance of an ordinary farming man from a local village, yet one thing above all others stood out, and Ouba chewed on her lip as she took in the long, jagged scar that wound its way from the man's nose to his brow in place of his left eye.

At her scrutiny, the man chuckled, holding up his hands in mock surrender.

"I've surprised you — I'm sorry." He said lightly. "I didn't mean to make you jump — but I couldn't let you cry so pitifully, all alone in a place like this."

"You… *knew* I was crying?" Ouba stared at him, any pretence of manners gone as she tried to work out who this stranger was. "You came here… because you knew I was crying?"

"Yes." The man agreed cheerfully. "I hope you're not offended. Even though it was Boushin-kun who called me here, I'm not sure whether he's had a chance to mention it to you or your companions at all. You've been busy since your arrival, I understand, Ouba-hime-

sama.”

“You… know my name, too?” Ouba got slowly to her feet, taking a hesitant step or two towards him, then stopping. “How? Who are you? Why do you refer to the Emperor as Boushin-kun? What kind of person does that? Hikari told me that that was his real name, but even so, to use it…”

“Ah, that’s a bad habit of mine.” The man looked sheepish, shaking his head. “When you know someone as a child, it’s hard to realise they’ve become an adult with a country to lead and govern in their own right. I apologise, Hime. I’m sure I’ve confused you in half a dozen ways — when really I only came to make sure you weren’t in any trouble.”

“I…” Ouba faltered, then she gathered her wits, shooting him a reproachful look.

“You haven’t answered my question.” She reminded him. “I asked who you were. If you know my name, at least do me the courtesy of telling me yours.”

“I’m doing everything backwards, so it seems.” The man laughed, seemingly not put out by her indignation. “My apologies, Hime. Of course, you’re right.”

He bowed his head once more.

“Ri Hou Jun, at your service.”

“Ri… Hou Jun?” Ouba’s brows knitted together, as she tried to work out where she had heard that name before. “I don’t understand… what are you…”

“If you’ve spoken to Hikari, you surely know who I am.” The man smiled. “She seems to be quite taken with you, and resolved to travel with you to the East. That being the case, I thought it best I accepted B… Reizeitei-sama’s invitation and came to court myself to ensure everything was properly arranged for the journey. She is my responsibility, . And it’s a long way into Kutou’s land without the ease of magic.”

“Hikari… knows you?”

“I should hope so.” Hou Jun’s remaining red eye danced with amusement. “Since she’s been living with my family for the best part of a year and a half.”

At this, Ouba’s eyes widened.

“Oh!” She exclaimed, then, “Are you… could you be… *Chichiri*?”

“Then you have heard of me.” The man nodded, reaching down to pull up his right trouser leg and Ouba gasped as she saw the vivid red mark for ‘well’ slashed across the newcomer’s kneecap. “That’s right. Though these days my duties mostly involve keeping Hikari out of trouble — in whatever way that entails.”

Ouba hesitated, then she bowed her head.

“I feel that I’ve been rude to you.” She said apologetically. “I’m sorry, Chichiri-sama. I didn’t understand who you were.”

“Chichiri-*sama*?” Chichiri tilted his head on one side. “No, Hime, you shouldn’t treat me with such formality. I’m just an ordinary man, — there’s no reason for a Princess to show me deference.”

“But you’re one of the God’s people! You’re…”

“Being chosen by Suzaku was an accident of birth, nothing more auspicious than that.” Chichiri shook his head, eying the Princess in interest. “And I have a bad habit of informality when I come to this court. As I said, I’ve known Bo… Reizeitei-sama since he was a baby, and have been closely interested in his life since then. His father died, , before he was born — but that father was my ally and my comrade as well as a dear, true friend. I promised him then that I’d help his son in any way I can, and so it’s come to the point where I can move freely around Kounan’s court without anyone questioning where I’m going or why. The Emperor has placed a good deal of faith in me, for one reason or another — but you shouldn’t think that because of it you should start bowing to me and calling me ’-sama’. You’re a Princess of Sairou. Your God is not the Phoenix. And I would not have a foreign born Princess bow to me under any circumstances whatsoever.”

Ouba blushed.

“I never met a Seishi before.” She admitted shyly. “Though I’ve heard lots of stories. Hikari told me some about you and your friends… about her father, and everything else. But I didn’t think I’d meet you… I thought you’d be far too busy to come to court just because a foreign party were passing through.”

“This visit means a lot to Reizeitei-sama, since he values very highly the good relationship he has with your Lord Father.” Chichiri said wisely. “That’s one reason why, when I sensed your distress, I came to find you. It would be no good, , if a negative report went back to Arudo about your treatment or our hospitality here.”

“Oh, it’s nothing like that!” Ouba looked horrified, shaking her head. “I’d never say such a thing — in fact, I sent a message to my brother to say the opposite! It’s nothing to do with Kounan… it’s just… I had a disagreement with my travel companion, and I suppose… I suppose…”

“You fear going East?” Chichiri asked gently, and Ouba blinked, then nodded her head.

“How did you know?”

“It screams from your aura like a wounded beast.” Chichiri told her evenly. “Your homesickness, your uncertainty, your fear of marrying a man almost twice your age. Forgive my plain-speaking, Hime — it’s not usually my style at all. But it’s not usual to be accosted by so many distressed emotions all pounding against each other to be dominant in your mind. You’re concealing a lot of negativity — and it’s not healthy.”

“I didn’t realise it was so obvious.” Ouba reddened. “Is that your power, then, Chichiri-san? That you can sense people’s emotions and tell how they feel?”

“Part of it.” Chichiri agreed. “I’m a sorcerer, and I’ve had a long time to perfect several skills under that guise. I also realise it’s no place of mine to be commenting on your happiness or otherwise. But as a father myself, I can’t let a young girl wallow in so much unhappiness and not do anything about it. You really are a very strong person, . It’s just whether or not you let your strength become positive or negative energy that matters.”

He grinned.

“Hikari seems to like you very much, and I trust her judgement.” He added. “I hope you will trust her, also. She’s probably one who’ll understand more than anyone what things face you in the weeks to come.”

“I think that too.” Ouba admitted. “And… and I’m not upset that you came and spoke to me at random like this. I mean, Hikari said nice things about you, and you seem to be… a kind person. But you’re a Seishi, so that’s not surprising.”

She sighed, glancing at her hands.

“I just wish I hadn’t said what I said to Kinka.” She admitted. “Now she’s cross with me, and I don’t want that.”

“One bad exchange of words can’t destroy a long term friendship so

easily." Chichiri said wisely. "I'm sure that Kinka-san understands just as well as I do the turmoil that you're keeping inside."

"You know who Kinka is, too?"

"It would be impossible not to, considering." Chichiri smiled. "Yes. I know. A daughter of Sairou's infamous Han-ke — it'd be odd if I didn't know who she was."

"Han… ke?" Ouba looked startled. "But… Kinka's name is Kei. She looks like her father. Why…"

"Is it what people look like that counts, or how their heart acts?" Chichiri asked softly. "Kinka's chi is the chi of someone with ultimate loyalty to the Royal House of Sairou. I've been to your land, and once or twice, to your capital city, too. I know a little about Western politics. And I know that of all the families, the Han is the one who is closest to the Emperor's house. Kinka is a Han, isn't she? Even if her father wasn't — she is, isn't she?"

"Yes." Ouba nodded. "Her mother was… and so is she."

"Then I'm sure you have no reason to worry." Chichiri said frankly. "I doubt that she would let anything so trivial as an argument come in the way of that bond."

He held out his hand to her.

"Will you come with me, Ouba-hime? The Emperor is worried about you, and I'm sure you'd like to lay his fears to rest."

"Yes, I suppose you're right." Ouba bit her lip, hesitantly taking the Seishi's hand in hers. "I didn't mean to make him think that I was unhappy here. Actually, being in Kounan has been a welcome break from my trip to the East… I don't want to be rude when he's been so kind."

"It's not an easy duty, being a Princess." Chichiri reflected, and Ouba shook her head.

"It's not." She agreed, as they made their way through the gardens towards the steps. "But I should be used to it by now."

"Arranged marriages, forced courtesy…" Chichiri paused, then he grinned. "Well, who knows? Maybe you will see your homeland again. And Kintsusei-sama isn't an unreasonable King — I'm sure you'll find the rebuilding court in Shunhou as pleasant as this one, when you've had time to adjust."

"Everyone says that, but I won't know till I'm there and I meet him

for myself." Ouba sighed heavily. "But there's nothing to be gained by worrying about it. So I mustn't. I just have to do it… do my duty as a Princess and keep my Father's promise. That's all."

"You have a heavy burden on you, my child." Chichiri said gravely, all humour gone from his expression as he helped her mount the steps. "It's that reason above all others that made me seek you out today. I was surprised when I realised how great a burden it truly was — to go East at this crucial time and to make a marriage in these circumstances. I think you'll find more allies in Shunhou than you imagine — things will be all right once you get there."

"What do you mean?" Ouba looked confused, and Chichiri spread his hands.

"Even if I was to try and explain it, I don't think you'd understand. Not yet." He said levelly. "But on balance maybe it's a good thing that Hikari and Aoi are going with you to Shunhou. You might find yourself glad of other allies, in the weeks to come."

"You sound like a cryptic fortune teller." Ouba reflected, and Chichiri shook his head.

"No. That's not a power I have." He said evenly. "But at Shunhou's court is someone who does, and you should speak to her in great detail when you have a chance. That's my advice to you, Ouba-hime. You've heard Hikari speak of Myoume, no doubt — the wife of the Kutou Shougun, Tou Hyoushin. Do you also know Myoume's other name? Has Hikari told you that as well?"

"She's Toroki of Byakko." Ouba agreed. "She was chosen to protect… something… before she married her husband. That's right, isn't it?"

"Yes." Chichiri nodded. "And I think she's someone you should seek out as an ally as soon as you possibly can. You may already have noticed unusual things on your trip to the East — and Myoume is probably the only living soul who can explain those things with any coherence. Your fight with Kinka-dono will no doubt be resolved before you leave — but even so, make sure you remember what I've said. It's very important, Hime-sama. Very important indeed."

Ouba's brows knitted together as she digested this.

"Something did happen in Hengei." She murmured. "Something that Kinka knows more about than I do. Something… maybe… she was involved in, though I can't be sure and she won't tell me. But from what you've just said… Kinka won't always be there to protect

me, will she? When we get to Kutou — it might come to the point where she can't protect me any more. That's what you mean, isn't it? That I need to learn to stand on my own feet and find my own allies, if I can? Because Kinka… Kinka has… other things she has to do."

"No doubt." Chichiri agreed. "Though as I said, I'm not the one who reads fortunes. I can only go by what I read in people's chi — and try and work out what that means. But it's as you say — there'll be a time when you can't rely on Kinka-dono to be your protector. That you know that too is a good thing."

"I've always known it, but more especially on this trip." Ouba confessed. "I know she's hiding something from me — something big. The more I think about it, the more I think it has to do with Byakko — that what happened in Hengei, when the fire stopped — that it wasn't just an unexplained miracle but stellar power of some description sent by Byakko himself. And the more she won't talk about it, the more sure I am. I think…"

"Not here, and not now." Chichiri put his finger to his lips, shaking his head. "This is a discussion you shouldn't be so ready to have with someone you only just met, Hime-sama. You are eager to trust in people here because Kounan is your father's staunch ally and that's not a bad attitude to have. But it might also put you — or those you love — in danger. Remember that, all right? I hope you'll never have to understand exactly what I mean — but you have to take responsibility for your own actions and think them through before you launch in."

He laughed, looking sheepish, and the sudden solemn moment was broken.

"Listen to my rudeness." He said ruefully. "Scolding and chiding a Princess — my manners have completely deserted me. I'm sorry, you know. I've been casual around Bous… Reizeitei-sama for far too long and it's had a terrible effect on me."

"No… it's all right." Ouba shook her head. "I'll remember what you said, Chichiri-san. And I'll do my best to try and stand up a little more for myself. Because if Kinka is… going to not be able to protect me forever, I'll need to stand on my own feet. I'm a Princess of Sairou. That's something I can do. My Father and my brother are both really strong, independent people… maybe it's time I started following in their footsteps instead of just relying on other people such a lot."

"Good girl." Chichiri's good eye crinkled at the corners as he offered her a smile. "Your father must be a very proud man, Hime. He

has a very intelligent daughter."

"Sometimes I wonder." Despite herself, Ouba laughed. "Thank you, Chichiri-san. You've made me feel a little better, at the least. And I'll talk to Kinka, and make her forgive me before we leave tomorrow. Then, well, I guess we'll just take each day as it comes."

She bowed her head slightly towards him, then slipped her hand free of his grasp, turning and heading along the corridors to the chambers which she and Kinka had inhabited since their arrival in the south.

"Hikari said Chichiri was a good person, and he seems that way to me." She mused as she went. "Though not at all how I pictured him to be. Still, there is something about him. Something… different. I suppose that's the Phoenix's magic that runs through him. And the things he said… he said as though he speaks from experience. It was kind of him to come to help me, when we've never even met. And what he said…"

She paused, slowing her pace to a walk as she made her way up the stairwell to the guest chambers.

"Kinka's always protected me, but she knows she can't always do it, and it bothers her." She realised. "If something did happen in Hengei, and it was Kinka who did it, then no wonder she's trying to keep it a secret. Because if I'm right… if all the things Hikari and Chichiri said are right… Kinka might be like this Myoume-san in Kutou. She might have a mark on her — a mark of Byakko. And if she does then she's there to protect Sairou, not just protect someone like me."

She sighed, biting her lip.

"But Kinka is loyal, and she wants to protect me because she gave her word and because we're friends." She concluded. "So she thinks, if she hides it from me, we won't have to be parted. And I should stop asking her about it, if that's how she feels. I should just get stronger so that its okay for her to go and do whatever she has to do when the time comes. I don't know why Byakko might have chosen her, but after what happened in Hengei, I'm pretty certain that he did. And it wasn't just to keep a silly Princess safe from harm."

She shook her head as if to clear it.

"That settles it." She decided resolutely. "The sooner we get to Shunhou — and the sooner my marriage to Kintsusei-sama is resolved — the better. I'll do as Chichiri-san says, and seek out this Myoume-san if I can. Maybe then Kinka will be able to own up to the truth and

be whatever she's meant to be — if she doesn't have to worry that I'm all right any more. All this homesick wailing has done nothing except divide her loyalties. I'm being selfish and I need to stop it. For Kinka's sake, I need to stop."

With that decided, she hurried along the final corridor, pounding on the door of her companion's room with little regard for her status.

"Kinka?" She called. "Kinka, if you're there, I'm sorry. I won't ask you about Hengei again, I promise. If you don't want to discuss it then it's fine with me, and I won't discuss it any more."

There was a pause, then the sound of the door lock unfastening, and the divide swung back to reveal the pale face of the young noblewoman.

At the sight of her, Ouba threw caution to the wind, flinging her arms around her friend and hugging her tightly.

"I've been mean and unreasonable because I've been feeling sorry for myself far too much." She said sadly. "And I've been selfish and not thought about how hard it's been for you as well, doing all of these things and keeping me safe. I'm sorry, Kinka. I won't do it again. Will you forgive me? I promise not to act like that again."

"You're not to blame for anything, Hime." Kinka disentangled herself from the embrace, holding the Princess at arm's length, and Ouba's heart leapt as she saw the warmth in the other girl's eyes. "I shouldn't try and reproach you, no matter how close our relationship."

"Even so, pulling rank is not something I do."

"I probably crossed a line." Kinka sighed. "Let's just draw a line under it — under everything so far — and look to tomorrow, shall we? It's a whole new number of challenges, . We don't need to be bothering about those in the past."

"Agreed." Ouba nodded her head. "Let's do that. I feel better now… about going to Shunhou and everything that's waiting there. It'll be all right, I'm sure of it. I'm going to be stronger, so it will all work out fine!"

Chapter 15

Chapter Fourteen

At last, he had found her.

The shadow crouched in the darkened alcove of the mountain ledge, his brow creased in concentration as one by one he filtered the cacophony of spirit presences down to the one he sought above all others.

He shivered, muttering a curse as he pulled his cloak more tightly around his body as he glared bad-temperedly out across the snow-sprinkled landscape. It was ironic that it should be here, he reflected darkly. It was almost as if, by making him come to this desolate section of the ShijinTenchishou, the Tiger was forcibly reminding him of things long since cast into history. Despite himself, he didn't like the sensation. The cold, bleak mountainside seemed all to easily to reflect the emptiness of his heart and, as he interpreted the chi that saturated his surroundings, he felt something inside of him clench. A moment of irrational anger stabbed through him, and it was all he could do to keep it back. Byakko had not said that it would be easy, he mused to himself bitterly. He had accepted the duty — now he must see it through to the end.

Yet even though he knew that he was no longer connected to anything or anyone, the familiar taint in the chi of the local people made him remember all too keenly past encounters with those whose lives, then, had seemed worth nothing at all.

"Of all the frigging *stupid* places to hide her." He muttered, drumming his fingers impatiently against the hard stone that protected him from the worst of the wintery gales. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you'd done it on purpose to piss me off, Byakko. Though I guess that there is one thing about it being here. Noone in their right mind would come to this place looking for her. But seriously, are you trying to make my job as unpleasant as possible?"

He sighed, sinking back against the mountain slope as he watched the birds wheeling and shrieking over his head. They were tough, ugly creatures, he reflected dryly, possessed of thick, clumped together feathers and set deep into their narrow heads were beady, soulless eyes that searched the landscape for carrion. As he watched them loop and dive towards the battered carcass of an unfortunate deer, he

found his memory drawn back to a previous time spent in sandier territory, where, as a small boy, he had hidden from the terrifying calls of the hunting desert vultures.

At this recollection, he frowned, shaking his head as if to clear it.

“Those are memories I don’t need.” he murmured. “There’s nothing to be gained from recalling that sequence of events — and if I’m going to stay steady and do what I’m here to do, I need to filter the useful data from the sentimental rubbish. There’s no room for soft feelings or moments of fear or weakness in any of this. I have a job and I’ll carry it out. That’s all.”

He reached for his bow, notching an arrow idly against the string as he heard the vultures calling again. They were not as big, yet twice as scrawny looking as the ones which he remembered in Sairou’s unforgiving scrubland, but even though he knew they could not hurt him, he did not like the way their cries echoed through his body, stirring things that he had worked hard to keep dead.

He pulled back the arrow, preparing to let it slip seamlessly from his fingers. One twitch and the barb would plunge deep into the bird’s heart, silencing it forever and restoring peace to the mountains.

His grip steadied, the string becoming taught, but then, as he prepared to release the arrow into the ether, something made him pause.

He sighed, glancing at the bow ruefully as slowly he lowered it back down onto the ledge beside him.

He wasn’t here for this. A lifetime’s instinct had surged inside of him for a brief moment, but there was nothing to be gained from slaying innocent, ugly birds and giving away to anyone that someone with skills such as his lurked in the shadows of the mountains. He had come to this place for a specific reason, — and he did not have the time to waste on trivial pursuits.

“It seems I’m still far too human .” He reflected out loud, knowing that there was noone on the mountain to hear his words. “Enough of this. I’ve come here to find that one — and it’s time I stopped putting it off. Even if it is an unlikely place to find her, this is where she is. I can sense it… and it’s time I capitalised on those senses!”

“We didn’t see you in the city yesterday, Shirobu.”

As the apothecary sat down at the bar in one of Eiroku’s run down city taverns, the innkeeper cast him a surprised grin, resting fat, hairy

hands on the counter as he met his companion's gaze. "I was surprised — thought you wouldn't be taking time off from the market with so many people in this place needin' the things you have to sell."

"You just want to see me come into your place and spend coin, Rijou." Shirobu said dryly, leaning back in his seat. "But I have other places I go too, you know. Just because I trade in Eiroku from time to time doesn't mean I don't have other interests. You people don't have a monopoly on my remedies — you know that and you never have."

He eyed his companion quizzically.

"Why the curiosity?" He added. "You aren't usually the type to fuss over other people's business if it isn't yours to share. Why would it concern you? Noone in your family's about dying of some plague, are they?"

"Hell, no." The innkeeper shook his head. "Considering the fact that bastard Emperor keeps trying to stem supplies to the city, we're doing all right. Since we got a supply of water flowing through the town, travellers come through an' we get the toll. It's been years since the smuggling ring was crushed an' all of that — but if Arudo don't care about that, all we can do is rely on the people who do. Even if you do go other places, Shirobu, don't forsake this place, huh? Eiroku has its flaws, but not everyone is gutter slime."

"I know that." Shirobu pursed his lips, a frown touching his features as he remembered his first encounter with his wife in the ramshackle desert town. "There are vipers in the midst, that's all, and those vipers have kept the normal people here underfoot for far too long. I won't discriminate my trading even if those vipers are here, Rijou. You should know that by now. I'm an apothecary. If people are sick, and I can provide a remedy, I'll do it."

"For sure." Rijou's fat features broke into a smile and he clasped Shirobu's hand warmly in his. "I haven't forgot how you brought herbs to still my wife's fever when my second son was born, an' I never will. Even though you're from outside, noone here sees you that way. We're glad of it, Shirobu. That's the honest truth. Without folk like you, we'd be even more wretched than we are now."

"Maybe it's time to petition the Emperor again." Shirobu suggested. "It can't hurt, . Like you say, the smuggling generation are dead now. The children growing up here are nothing to do with Eiroku's chequered past. It's time they moved forward."

"Heiboutei's never cared about listening to people once they've upset him in one way." Rijou said darkly. "In this city, his name isn't

one associated with anything except hardship an' strife, and there's no point petitioning deaf ears. Maybe when his son is Emperor, we might try it then. But word is he's from the same mould… an' we're just ordinary folk."

He grimaced, twitching his fingers in the direction of the far corner.

"Plus, so long as we have loudmouthed thugs such as the Hoku-ke getting on their high horse and dictating our way of greetin' travellers, noone's goin' to want to back our cause." He added bitterly. "Since the day that Eastern witch restored water to the centre of the city, they've done nothing but work to get as much profit as they can from it, even though it was a deal cut in Eiroku's name. They talk about it being theirs by right, on account of it being done in memory of one of their clan who was wrongfully cut down. But you don't need me to tell you about that, do you? , you know all about that family. Better, probably, than I do."

"As you say." Shirobu's eyes darkened and he nodded his head. "There's a good reason why I don't let Anara come anywhere near this city. I haven't forgotten the blooded, tear-stained mess that she was when I first rescued her from that monster. Whenever I see members of his kin or hear them wail on about how he was unjustly murdered by a madman, it just makes me wonder why I hesitated in taking my chance to slit the man's throat myself. It's bothered me again and again that because he was drunk and she needed me more, I didn't take a weapon to him then and there and put an end to it. I hesitated because I've always been taught to treat the wounded before seeking any kind of fight. But if I had… even if it had hanged me, I wouldn't have regretted it for a moment."

Rijou's eyes softened.

"How *is* Anara?" He asked gently, and Shirobu smiled.

"Well, thank you." He responded. "Excited that our daughter's correspondance from the East brings news of an impending grandchild. And busy, as ever, in the village. Lately she's taken to looking after an orphaned waif from the mountains, too — I suppose even now she has a strong maternal instinct."

"A mountain waif? A desert rat?" Rijou looked surprised, and Shirobu nodded.

"Yes." He agreed. "In honesty, she seems like a nice kid."

"Or a thief waiting till your back is turned…?"

"Even if she was, I couldn't turn her away." Shirobu shook his head.

“It’s my fault Anara lost her son, . I at least owe her this.”

“Her son…” Rijou’s eyes narrowed, and he nodded. “Ah yes. The boy wonder. Miramu, wasn’t it? The young tearaway who showed that family of bullies what he thought of the way they behaved?”

“He did something that I should have done, and saved both him and Anara so much pain.” Shirobu agreed quietly. “I always looked at the boy as part of *that* family, till it was too late to look at him as anything else. But Anara loved him. And even though he turned out bad, I still think that I could’ve prevented it. So if this kid has taken Anara’s fancy, I won’t stand in her way. She seems quite attached already… so be it.”

“You’re a softie, in fact.” Rijou let out a hearty laugh. “All right, then. I suppose I knew that already, . How long have we known one another, my friend? I know it all too well.”

He eyed his companion keenly.

“Many men wouldn’t have looked at Anara as a potential wife, considering what that brute did to her.” He said gravely. “She was always a bright, exciteable child, . What happened to her was unforgivable. What you did… I guess I knew then that you were a true man of honour right then. Taking her from this place, covering up the truth of the assault and allowing her to start a new life in Shouki-mura, away from the worst of the city gossips. And then, to take her as your wife, too…”

“Well, I didn’t marry her from pity, though I rescued her because I wanted to help her.” Shirobu sighed. “I came to love her the more I saw how much spirit she had to cope and recover from what had happened to her. Even though her family discarded her as tainted, she still struggled on and didn’t complain. How could I not feel anything but affection for a woman as strong as that?”

He grimaced.

“But Miramu was always a bone of contention.” He admitted. “I don’t understand, even now, why she loved him so much as she did. Considering how he came about, I’ve never understood it. But I suppose I can’t understand the complexities of a mother’s love… can I? Even now he’s gone, I feel that his ghost is still there, somehow. Though she’s sure he’s at peace, and Myoume too, somehow Miramu’s crimes have rent holes in the family which are hard to repair. Maybe this young girl will be the thing to repair them. Like I said, I don’t think she’s dishonest. She’s cheeky and cocky, but not unpleasant. We’ll see.”

“Sounds to me like you miss having a child around as well, my friend.” Rijou teased, and Shirobu nodded.

“I think I do.” He agreed sheepishly. “Seeing the kids running and playing round the village does make me nostalgic for the days when Myoume and Miramu used to run riot round Shouki-mura’s trees. That was one thing he always was — a shield for my daughter, .”

Rijou pursed his lips, eying his companion for a moment.

“This makes me think of something else.” He said softly. “Shirobu, it’s no secret that that boy was one of the chosen — was it? That Miramu was… one of Byakko’s people? It was all over the town when he slew his father like he did. He made no secret — he left the mark at the scene an’ disappeared into the night. An’ then, eighteen months or more ago, he showed up here with a platoon of foreigners, as cold-eyed an’ bitter as you’d like, if the stories are to be believed. Course, they’re only from the point of view of the Hoku family, who still maintain that that bastard didn’t have anythin’ to do with the kid’s conception whatsoever. But he was Amefuri — wasn’t he? Your stepson. He was one of *those* people?”

“Yes.” Shirobu looked surprised. “There’s no secret in it. Like you said, the whole city knew after he murdered his father, even if they hadn’t known quite so clearly before. Why?”

“Well, that’s the question.” Rijou’s brows knitted together. “See, yesterday, someone was here askin’ questions about that exact subject.”

“About Miramu?” Shirobu’s eyes widened, and Rijou shook his head.

“No. Not specifically Miramu.” He replied. “Byakko. *His* people.”

“I see.” Shirobu’s brows furrowed. “In what sense? Who was asking, and what kind of questions?”

“A man in palace uniform.” Rijou paused for effect, then, “Zarin.”

“Zarin?” Shirobu stared. “*Rou* Zarin? Rou Gaien’s son?”

“The same.” Rijou’s lips parted to reveal yellowed teeth. “Turns out the boy’s made good on his scrappy heritage and landed a comission in Arudo, now. Though considering the hoops he’s jumped through to get there — I guess I can’t begrudge him it.”

“Zarin’s working for the Emperor, and asking about Byakko’s people?”

“Well, the crest on his uniform was some Northern family’s, but yes. Something like that.” Rijou agreed. “I guess they sent him this way because they figured we wouldn’t tear apart one of our own. Whatever work he does now, Zarin was always a popular kid in these parts. But he came straight here, Shirobu. And he asked… about Byakko. Like he knew where he was looking — like he remembered something from his childhood.”

“Zarin was about two years older than Miramu.” Shirobu frowned. “But Miramu grew up in Shouki-mura. Would Zarin have known anything about it?”

“Maybe.” Rijou shrugged. “Zarin was sixteen when he left Eiroku in search of a commission. I wouldn’t like to tell you if it was before or after the murder. But enough people here know the story an’ they’ll no doubt spill information for gold coins, since Zarin’s not an outsider and the glitter of gold still gets to people’s hearts in this place. You might want to speak to him yourself, before others do it for you. Even though Miramu’s dead — I’m sure it ain’t a coincidence that of all places Zarin came looking, he came here.”

“Probably not.” Shirobu rubbed his chin pensively, his thoughts flitting to the young girl currently sheltering in the village. “I’ll talk to Anara, see what she thinks. As you said, Miramu’s dead. There’s nothing to be done about that, and probably no harm in talking about it. However…”

He faltered, and Rijou’s eyes became understanding.

“Your daughter’s baby is due soon, is it?” He asked softly, and Shirobu started, looking confused. Rijou nodded.

“I thought so.” He murmured. “Myoume is one too, isn’t she? Of those people. S’why I warned you most of all, to tell you the truth. I wasn’t totally sure — but I thought so. You don’t talk about it, but I remember… things that were said, back when.”

He smiled, making a zipping motion across his lips.

“I’ll let you decide what you tell the boy, if anything.” He added. “It ain’t my business to spread gossip about my friend’s kin. But if he’s come from Arudo, an’ he wants Byakko’s help, spare a thought for Eiroku, huh? If Byakko’s people are found in this part of the world, , maybe the Emperor’ll finally wake up and take notice. If Byakko ain’t forsaken us, there’s no reason for the crown of Sairou to do so, right?”

“I’ll speak to Anara.” Shirobu repeated, consternation in his dark eyes. “And I appreciate the warning. I don’t understand why this

subject would come up now — but I'm glad to know about it."

He got to his feet, offering his friend a smile.

"Your news and your discretion is welcome, as ever." He concluded. "But it's getting later, and I should head home before it grows dark. Even I'm not so much a fool as to prowl Eiroku's streets in the dark."

With that he left the tavern, deep in thought as he returned to where his horse was tethered. Though theft of steeds was not uncommon in a town like Eiroku, Shirobu was a well-known enough face not to fall foul of even the local horse rustlers, and the mare, though pawing the ground impatiently, was unmolested by her short wait outside. Almost without thinking about it, Shirobu loosed her ties, mounting her and twitching at the reins as he urged her into a canter.

"Back to the village, girl." He said softly, as the horse tossed her head in relief to be back on the road, obediently stepping up her pace to her usual sprightly gait as they approached the city gates. "Soon as you can do it. I need to speak to Anara… and to Haruka. This can't be a coincidence, . The kid turns up and now Zarin's in the city asking questions about Byakko's people. He's no fool — I know that, it's the main reason why he had enough smarts to escape Eiroku's drag factor and do all right for himself. I don't remember whether he left the city before or after Miramu killed his father, but it wouldn't surprise me that he'd know all about it. The legend of Amefuri the mad Seishi is indellibly linked to these parts. He'd want to check it out, whether or not he thought it was true."

He twitched the reins again, encouraging his eager mount into a faster gait as they crossed the rocky terrain towards the copse of trees that marked the boundary of Shouki-mura. The horse was one of desert stock, happier out on the dry land than in the claustrophobic confines of a city of Eiroku's quality, and as they rode, Shirobu knew he was much the same way. He had grown up in Shouki, , and despite his family's close ties to the local city, he was always relieved when he drew away from the gates that he did not have to spend the night. It was no place to raise a family, and absently Shirobu gave thanks to Byakko for allowing him such an easy respite in one of Sairou's harshest regions.

But then, with three of Byakko's people now having appeared within Shouki-mura's boundaries, and considering the unusually plentiful supply of plantlife and water that kept the village flourishing, Shirobu could not help wondering whether the place he had always

called home was blessed by Byakko in a far deeper sense than even he understood.

“I suppose you know what you’re doing, kami-sama.” He murmured, raising his gaze to the heavens as his horse sped over the uneven ground as if it was smooth and slick as could be. “But I wish I understood more clearly why it’s always been our family. I’m sure there’s a reason — a good reason. But it would help, sometimes, if I knew what that reason was.”

At that moment he saw the first view of the cluster of trees and with a smile on his face, he pushed the horse to step up her pace yet again, covering the remaining ground in record time. As they reached the copse, he pulled the animal to a gentle trot, patting her sweat-drenched neck as she allowed him to ride her slowly through the familiar pathways to the apothecary’s building. She did not need his guidance here, for she had made the trip more times than he could count, and before long he was dismounting her, removing her tack and turning her loose to cool down before the night drew in.

“Shirobu!”

Anara’s voice made him turn to meet his wife’s quizzical gaze, and he smiled, holding out his hands.

“This is a nice welcome home.” He observed lightly. “We made it back before dusk, this time.”

“You are early.” Anara admitted, taking his fingers slowly in hers. “Not that I mind in the least, but you only ride that poor beast like the devil’s on your heels when something important is on your mind. What’s happened, Shirobu? I could hear the pounding hoofbeats from the house, and I knew it was your horse. I know her step, even from this distance. Is something wrong — did something happen in Eiroku?”

“No, but I did come home as fast as I could, because I want to speak to you.” Shirobu admitted. “Is Haruka here, too? Or is she already asleep? She’s had a busy few days.”

“She was helping me to prepare dinner.” Anara shook her head. “She really is a surprisingly quick learner, Shirobu.”

“Well, the Gods work in mysterious ways, so they say.” Shirobu reflected. “But good. What I have to say concerns her too — or at least, it might do. Depending what we do about it.”

“Might do?” Anara looked startled, then she sighed, nodding her head. “All right. Dinner will have to wait a while, I can see — this is

obviously something you need to get off your chest before you'll relax."

She wiped her hands absently on her apron, leading the way into the solar and calling for Haruka as she did so. Within a few moments the dark haired urchin had poked her head around the door of the kitchen and, seeing the serious expression on her hosts' faces, she frowned, pulling the rest of her skinny body into the room and shutting the door behind her.

"What's up?" She demanded. "Something happen?"

"Maybe." Shirobu dropped down into a seat with a sigh, gesturing for Haruka to join them as his wife followed suit. The youngster sank down onto the rug, apprehension in her gaze as she glanced from Shirobu to Anara.

"Is it something I've done wrong?" She asked softly, anxiety in her tones. "Are you… going to ask me… to go away?"

"It's nothing you've done wrong, Haruka." Shirobu assured her quickly. "It's nothing like that, and you shouldn't look so worried. We've told you that you're welcome to stay here — and we don't go back on our word. Don't fret about it — I'm not angry with you and neither is Anara."

"But something did happen in Eiroku?" Anara asked her husband quietly, and Shirobu shrugged.

"Rijou told me something that he thought I should hear." He said simply. "And he's right. If anyone should know about it, it's us."

"Who's Rijou?" Haruka looked blank, and Shirobu grinned.

"An innkeeper in Eiroku, and one of the city's better souls." He replied. "We've been friends a long time, and he's usually able to keep me in touch with anything that happens in the city. I trust his word on this, too — I don't think he'd have said anything if he hadn't thought it was going to have some impact in one way or another."

He met Anara's gaze, pursing his lips.

"Do you remember Rou Gaien's son, Zarin?" He asked quietly. "It's been a long time, so you might not."

"I remember Rou Gaien." Anara nodded. "His family and mine had dealings quite often in the city. And I do remember he had a couple of sons. But I'm not sure… Zarin? Was he the eldest? I remember Gaien's wife delivered a stillborn babe the first time, so when she bore her first healthy baby my mother and I were both there to help out as

much as we could… is it that baby that you mean?"

"Yes." Shirobu nodded. "Though he's no squealing baby any more."

"Well, he wouldn't be." Anara snorted. "He was a good two years at least older than Miramu, so he must be… well, around twenty six now, I imagine, maybe even twenty seven. Don't be silly."

"True." Shirobu rubbed his chin. "In any case, Zarin left Eiroku when he was sixteen to try and join a regiment and get a military commission. He was quite resolved about it, if I remember right. He was full of fire to prove that people from Eiroku weren't all traitors to the Emperor. And from the bits and pieces I've heard in passing since, he's made a good job of it."

"Excuse me, but what the hell has this got to do with any of us?" Haruka demanded. "Me in particular? Why do I care what this Zarin guy did or didn't do? I never met him, and I sure as hell have nothing to do with people from Eiroku if I can help it."

"You're impatient." Shirobu cast her a pensive smile. "But you're right. I'll get to the point. It seems that Rou Zarin is now a captain in one or other royal regiment. I don't know the details, but Rijou said he had a northern emblem on his armour, so I'm assuming that he's associated with one or other of the Emperor's surrounding noble families. Either way, he's come to Eiroku on a special commission… and Rijou made a particular note of the fact he's come straight here. It seems the boy's been charged with tracking down Byakko's people, presumably on Heiboutei-heika's behalf."

"Byakko's…?" Anara's eyes widened, and Haruka stared at the apothecary in alarm.

"He's… looking for *us*? But why? What does he want to do with us? Geiyo-san, what did you tell them about me?"

"Nothing at all." Shirobu shook his head. "I've mentioned to noone the fact that the young stray we've taken in of late has Byakko's mark on her body. But Rijou knows — just as everyone in Eiroku does — that one of Byakko's people once haunted these parts. And even though she's no longer here, Rijou also knows that Myoume was born that way, too. So he wanted me to be aware, in case he thought we should do anything about it."

"By one of Byakko's, you mean Miramu, don't you?" Anara's expression became pained, and Shirobu nodded.

"Unfortunately I don't think there's a single person in Eiroku who doesn't know that story." He said regretfully. "And from the fact

Zarin's headed straight to this area of Sairou suggests he remembers the scandal as well. I don't know if he knows that Miramu's passed on or not — but I suspect that's what he's looking for. People with information on Amefuri. And maybe, anything else."

"Myoume is in the East." Anara pursed her lips. "In no position to be fighting anyone's battles — not with a baby due and her stellar duties long since left behind her. And Miramu is no longer with us. So he's going to be disappointed, in the end. If he's really hoping to find Byakko's people for the Emperor, he's going to find he's looking in the wrong places."

"You're not going to give me to him?" Haruka looked startled, and Anara grinned.

"It's not up to us to start giving you to anyone. You're not a horse or a cow." She chided her companion gently. "You're a human being and we've already told you you can belong here. You don't need to worry about that changing, Haruka. You're more than just a stellar mark — I told you that."

"I know." Haruka admitted, flushing red. "But…"

She faltered, then raised her gaze to Shirobu's.

"Geiyo-san, what kind of person is this Rou Zarin?" She asked bluntly.

"Haru-chan?" Anara looked surprised, and Shirobu frowned.

"I've not seen the boy in some years." He admitted. "But my impression of him the times I did was that he was a straight-forward, level-headed young man not given to jumping to conclusions or bending his principles to fit the social norm. He left Eiroku because he was smart enough to see that he'd have to compromise his values if he was to stay here. And whatever other flaws Gaien has, he always taught his children honesty and honour."

"So you think… he's not a bad person?"

"My memory of him would say so, yes." Shirobu agreed. "Why? What are you thinking, Haruka?"

"I don't know." Haruka owned, twisting her fingers together. "Just… what you guys said in the cave. About how something bad was there, and the message they left. We haven't talked about it, but I've been thinking about it a whole lot. Someone wrote somethin' like that in the middle of a mountain cave, an' that ain't normal. Somethin' killed Hami an' the chibi, an' that's somethin' I don't like thinkin'

about. But if I really am this Subaru person, maybe it's because of that that this Zarin person has come to this part of Sairou. I ain't anyone special. Most people see me as a desert rat, except you both. So maybe there's nothing I can do, in the end, to change anything. But…"

"Are you saying you want to speak to him, Haru-chan?" Anara asked softly, and Haruka shrugged her shoulders.

"Maybe." She admitted. "You said it yourself, Anara-san. Miramu-san is dead and Myoume-san is in the East. They can't help. But if I survived in the cave it must've been because Byakko wanted me alive for somethin'. An' that I came here to learn about this stuff… maybe it wasn't an accident. Maybe it was on purpose . This guy suddenly appearing… if he comes from the Emperor, I guess, he can't be a bad person. Can he?"

"Heiboutei-heika is one of the best Emperors Sairou has had in its long history." Shirobu agreed. "Even though in Eiroku they have a different perspective, he's tremendously popular the length and breadth of the nation."

"Then surely if he wants help, maybe… I should tell him who I am?" Haruka suggested hesitantly. "Even if I'm no use to them in the end. They can only tell me to get lost, or laugh, . An' if people are goin' to die… I don't want that to happen. Last time it was the chibi an' Hami who suffered. Next time it could be you or Anara-san who got hurt, an' I don't want that. I don't want to be the jinx on your lives too."

"Noone thinks you're a jinx on anything, Haruka!" Anara protested, and Haruka's lips twitched into a faint smile.

"Hami an' the chibi died because they were close to me." She said gravely, in that instant sounding far more adult than her thirteen years merited. "When Hami was possessed by that dark ghost creature, she spoke to me. She said shit I didn't understand till I started to properly think about it. Till we went there an' I realised that it had gone into her an' used her like a puppet."

"What kind of things?" Shirobu asked gently, and Haruka's eyes darkened.

"Things like she'd waited a long time to kill me, an' that I was a pathetic imitation of whoever she'd thought I was supposed to be." She said flatly. "She knew I was somethin' even when I didn't understand it myself. Like she knew me, somehow. An' since we came back, I've been thinkin' about it a whole lot. What if, whatever that creature was, it knew Subaru in her other life? An' now it's carried

over to me, because I'm her again? If that's true, Hami an' the chibi's deaths were at least part because of me. An' if anythin' happened to you both too, I'd hate it."

"Haru-chan." Anara reached across to hug the young girl tightly. "I didn't realise you'd been thinking about it so hard."

"The girl is right, though." Shirobu looked troubled. "If that creature did say those things, it means that at the very least this hasn't ended with the deaths of two children in a cave. And worse than that, Anara. If this monster was attacking Haruka, it might find other targets, too. Other people blessed by Byakko. We can't rule out the possibility."

"Like Myoume?" Anara whitened, and Shirobu nodded.

"Yes."

"I won't let that happen." Haruka shook her head. "If I speak to this Zarin person, for sure I'll find out what the deal is. An' if I can use my power then I'll damn well try an' do it, even if I am a kid. There's no point me having it otherwise. I want to get my own back for Hami an' the chibi, in any case. An' it seems the logical thing for me to do. This creature wasn't able to kill me. So surely I can do somethin' to stop it killing someone else?"

"If she went to the palace, Haruka would probably have more protection than we can afford her, too." Shirobu reflected. "And with Myoume so far away, it would be easier to send a secure warning if such a thing needed to happen. The kid's not wrong, Anara. And Zarin is a level guy. I don't think he'd lie about his reasons for being in Eiroku."

Anara held Haruka at arm's length.

"I don't want to send you away, or for you to feel you're being sent away." She said softly. "I like having you here, and I don't like it when Byakko interferes and calls people away from me. You're the third one, Haru-chan. No matter what I do, I can't stop it, can I?"

Haruka smiled, tears glittering in her eyes.

"I'm not going to get killed or nothin' like that." She said firmly. "I'm jus' going to speak to this Zarin guy an' see what I need to do to help Sairou out. Because I know more about this danger'n anyone, now. An' I think I should tell someone important before it gets worse an' eats other people's souls out."

"Then tomorrow I'll seek out Zarin and ask him to pay us a visit."

Shirobu said frankly. “What you tell him is up to you, Haruka. We won’t interfere. This is your calling and your decision, . But whatever you decide — make sure you’re equal to it, all right? We don’t want to see you hurt.”

“I said it already. I won’t get killed.” Haruka shook her head. “I’ll find out how to be strong like the other Subaru and I’ll kick this monster’s ass properly. At the palace, someone must know somethin’ about how I can do that. Right?”

She cast Anara another smile.

“And then… if I can… I’ll come back here.” She said firmly. “If you’ll let me, I’ll come back.”

“Let’s see what tomorrow holds before we start setting things in stone.” Shirobu advised.

“But either way, you can always come back to Shouki-mura.” Anara assured her. “No matter what, Haru-chan. You can think of this as ‘home’. I know better than to try and get in Byakko’s way… but I don’t want you to forget that there’s always a home here for you. Whatever Zarin says and whether he wants you or not, you can stay here.”

“Then I guess it all depends on tomorrow.” Haruka took a deep breath, but there was relief in her eyes. “When this soldier dude comes t’call!”

Night was falling.

Arina rested her hands on the windowsill of the small bedchamber, glancing out at the snow-bleached landscape beyond. It had snowed most of the day, she knew, meaning that she had not been able to leave the confines of the hut for fear of falling into a drift or losing her bearings in the white flurry of flakes. However, with sunset had come a frost, and from the warmth of her vantage point she could see several of the Meihi children busy with planks of wood, shrieks of laughter drifting across the night air as they pulled one another around on what appeared to be a crudely fashioned toboggan. No doubt they had made it themselves, with offcuts from the village wood-carvers and carpenters lashed together with strong mountain vine, and their ability to create something from nothing impressed her no end. The village had none of the ameneties that, until she had arrived there, she had thought she needed to live. Yet there was no discontent among the pale-skinned younger generation as they strove to make the best of the harsh mountain conditions and limited

resources.

Despite herself, she felt a touch envious.

The Meihi were so full of life in every respect, she mused ruefully, moving slowly away from the window and sitting down on the end of her bed. Absently she touched the heavy woollen quilt in her fingers, knowing that this too had been woven by one of the village women in an intricate style that she was learning was distinctly Meihi in its layout. Even in the short time she had been a guest of the mountain people, she had come to learn that imagery was very important to them, and all around her chamber hung woven, carved or painted images of mountain life, from trees to mountain animals.

By comparison, the cluster of oddball belongings she had brought with her from her world seemed odd and out of place. After the incident with the cigarette and the rug, Arina had taken the difficult decision to rid herself of the cigarettes completely, somehow feeling ashamed to have even had them with her in an environment where everyone else bloomed with health. On Bakaru's advice, however, she had kept the lighter, and though she had not touched it since that incident, she had seen the wisdom in his remarks.

"*A device which can bring fire is of great use in a snow-capped mountain village*." He had told her gently. "*Even if I do not understand how it works, Arina, you should not discard things which may be of use to you in the days to come. You are not as strong as we against the winter weather. Keep it safe. You may yet find it has a further purpose*."

Arina sighed, reaching across to scoop up Suzuno's faded notebook and glancing at it, smoothing the cover down hesitantly as she did so. It seemed hard to believe now that this innocent looking volume had been the key to the door that had brought her into this world in the first place, for since it had glittered unexpectedly at Kishayi's touch, it had remained silent. Since she had become a part of the village life, and had entered the ShijinTenchishou properly, she had not been drawn into the notebook's memories in the way she had been before. Although when she looked at the pages they were still blank, she could no longer dig into Suzuno's memories of her time in the ShijinTenchishou and somehow she felt deflated by this fact.

"I want to know more about you, Suzuno-san." She murmured, flipping back the book's covers. "Why would you tell me just that much, and no more? Was it just to bring me here? Or is that all you have to say?"

She frowned, flopping back against the bedcovers. Tomorrow, the

message of her arrival might reach the Eastern capital, Kaeli had told her, and within a short few days she knew her Meihi hosts were confident of receiving a response. For her own part, Arina knew she was torn. She had become fond of the village in her short time here, and she knew that, although they still struggled to communicate beyond very basic words, she had managed to overcome Kishayi's initial fears and forge the foundations of a friendship with him. Yet Shunhou was her potential link with Hikari in the South, and more than ever now she wanted to see her friend. Somehow she felt that Hikari might understand the things she didn't — about Suzuno, her book, and the odd link between it, her and the ShijinTenchishou.

She got to her feet, pulling her thick woollen cloak around her shoulders. The house was quiet, as Kishayi was running errands and Kaeli had been called to a neighbour to help in the delivery of a baby's birth. Kaeli had asked her if she wanted to come too, but Arina had shied away from it, knowing that however matter-of-fact Kaeli might be about it, it was not something she wanted to be involved in. The child would likely come into the world healthy and with the Meihi blessing, yet Arina knew she was neither brazen nor strong-stomached enough to intrude on a family's private moment.

"Besides, I'm an outsider." She murmured resignedly. "Even though they accept me, they might see that as a bad omen or something, if I was to pop up at something like that, when there are so many important things riding on it. They're superstitious people, the Meihi, when it comes to their beliefs. I know that too well even from being here a short time. And I don't belong here. So it's better if I just stay out of the way."

She pushed open the door of the chamber, slipping along the silent hallway and out into the winter weather. As she carefully closed the door behind her, several of the village children called to her, waving and grinning their greeting and though Arina did not understand their words she grinned, returning the wave with one of equal enthusiasm. They had accepted her presence there without question, and as she turned towards the village boundary, she reflected on what kind of reaction children in her world might have to a stranger who looked like a Meihi.

"They'd stare, most likely, and point." She acknowledged sadly. "Even though the Meihi have been through so much, they're not unkind to people who resemble their tormentors. That's thanks to Bakaru, I guess. Though he doesn't seem to be telling people what to do all the time, it's obvious that this is his village and that he's the one holding them all together. I guess since he's taken me in and accepted

me, they all do, too. I shouldn't take it for granted that he's been so kind as he has… I guess I owe him more than I thought."

As she reached the village boundary she paused, almost tripping over the marker stones that barely peeked out above the snow-covered ground. For a moment she bent to sweep the white dust off the rounded object, squinting at its surface in the moonlight. On their return from Touran, Kaeli had explained the boundary stones to her and their meaning, and she pursed her lips, trying to remember which character she had found.

"Peace, I think." She decided at length. "That's the character this guy in Shunhou has in his name, if I remember right. *Ihi* or something like that."

She laughed ruefully to herself.

"Heck, at this rate I might find myself reading and speaking Meihi before I go home." She realised. "I guess it's because of Kishayi… because I want to speak to him and it's so frustrating having to improvise on ways to communicate when we're together. Or maybe it's just the atmosphere of this place — that everything is all tied up together. Language, culture, everything. I don't think there's anything quite like it anywhere in our world."

She stepped carefully over the stone, making her way along the pathway that Kishayi had shown her when he had taken her to his secret forest den. The moon was high in the sky, casting light across her path and making the scramble ahead clearly visible, though the path had been mostly concealed by the soft white powder. Taking a deep breath, Arina pulled herself up the uneven rocks and boulders until she reached the ledge where the forest trees stood tall and proud, and slowly she got to her feet, turning to glance back at the village from which she had come.

Even at night, the view was breathtaking, and for a moment she gazed at it, taking in the smoke-clouded rooftops and the glistening light of moon glow glinting off frozen patches of snow. Beyond, she could see paths and ledges down the mountain, and in the far distance the glittering lights of Touran were just visible, the night haze making it appear like some imaginary city out of a dream.

Arina sighed, staring up at the moon.

"I don't remember the last time the sky was so clear as this in Tokyo." She murmured. "This mountain is the most beautiful, peaceful place I've ever seen. When I go back home, I swear I'm going to visit more mountains and see if I can find any with a view that's anything

like this one."

Almost as soon as the thought had crossed her mind, she heard a rustle from the undergrowth behind her and she swung around, expecting to see one of the village Meihi or even Kishayi himself completing the last of his errands. However, it was not a person who emerged from the darkness, and Arina let out a little gasp, taking a step back against the mountain's sheer flank as she met the animal's beady gaze.

A wolf.

Inwardly she berated her carelessness — remembering too late that Bakaru and Kaeli had both warned her about mountain wolves and their ruthlessness when it came to stragglers lost on the mountains. Had Kaeli not said that their people had taken in and nursed numerous lost travellers who had come into contact with the vicious wild animals that prowled the northernmost peaks?

Her heart leapt in her throat as she realised the animal was not alone and, as it lifted its muzzle to the sky in a blood-chilling yowl, others began to emerge silently from the shadows of the trees. As one animal their gazes fixed on Arina, and the girl swallowed hard, all thoughts flying from her head as she contemplated her chances of escaping them. Wolves were fast, and these were clearly hungry, she realised. She was outnumbered, and without the skill of the local people on the mountain in descending the steep, uneven levels swiftly.

Fear washed over her, and as she backed against the sturdy trunk of an old tree, she opened her mouth, frantically hoping against hope that somehow, from somewhere, someone would hear her.

"Kishayi!" She screamed. "Someone! *Anyone,* dammit! Please God… *Help!*"

Author's Note

Still finding and uploading the chapters I didn't get around to uploading 3 years ago. Some of them probably need some serious editing work, but I figured it was better to get them up after promising to for so long than to fuss around too much with correcting commas and stuff… so please forgive any twitches you notice ;) Some I have fixed but I haven't had time to upgrade every chapter…

Chapter 16

Chapter Fifteen

"Keisuke-jisan!"

Makoto dropped his bag down in the hallway of the Sukunami apartment, meeting his uncle's gaze with a surprised one of his own. "Are you about living here now? That's the third night in a row you've been here when I came home from school — don't tell me you're still trying to work out a way of getting Arina-san out of that place?"

"Yes, but not with any success." Keisuke rubbed his temples, casting his nephew a resigned look. "Your father and mother have been looking at it too, but try as we might, we can't find any reason beyond the fact I gave her the book. It seems to be coincidental — my fault, even — that she's been pulled into this. But why or what to do about it… I have no clue."

"Then maybe you should give up." Makoto suggested, pushing open the door to the kitchen and pulling open the fridge as he searched for an un-opened can of soda. "We can't go there. You said so, didn't you? The book world only likes girls. And if Okaa-san can't go back in there, then the rest of us haven't got a chance. Not even Dad, even if he came from there… that's what you said, pretty much, right?"

"That's how it is." Keisuke lounged in the doorway of the kitchen, letting out a heavy sigh. "In any case, your parents have gone out to do some shopping and get a break from it. I said I'd wait here till you came home so that you didn't feel we were leaving you out — it's just been coincidence that the free time I've had has coincided with your after school activities."

"You mean being blackmailed by the class into showing up for a few worthless bunkasai meetings." Makoto frowned, flipping open his can and nodding his head. "Well? If you haven't found anything out, I don't see what the point is of carrying on. I read that book over and over when Neesan first disappeared, you know. There wasn't anything to tell me how to bring her back. So in the end, I gave up trying to find one. It was just that way, and it sucks. That world takes people… it doesn't seem to give 'em back."

"Makkun…" Keisuke eyed him for a moment, then shook his head.

"I don't give up so easy as that." He said frankly. "If it was my fault

Arina was pulled into the other world, then I feel I have some obligation to help her. She has no idea what she's up against… and she hasn't got Miaka to ask."

"But she probably has Neesan, right?" Makoto said sensibly.

"Not necessarily." Keisuke looked troubled. "The book I gave her was Suzuno's book. That was Sairou's legend. Hikari's in Kounan. It's a long way between the two, from what your parents have told me and from what I read myself when Miaka was Suzaku no Miko. Chances of them meeting up are remote."

Makoto frowned, digesting this. Then he spread his hands.

"This is sounding more and more like some shoujo manga the further I get into it." He owned. "If anyone at school had any idea this stuff was going on in my house…"

"This family's always been a bit unique, it's true." Keisuke admitted, leading the way into the lounge and sitting down in an empty seat. Makoto followed suit, setting his can down on the table and reaching across for the scattered pieces of paper Arina had left with Keisuke before her disappearance.

"I didn't know Arina-san could draw so well as this, mind you." he reflected. "I always thought she was kind of an airhead and getting Neesan into trouble all the time, but I guess I was wrong."

"Those pictures bother me a lot." Keisuke admitted. "Because of how accurate they are. She must have seen the Seishi through her own eyes, somehow. I don't know how, but there's no way that could've come from descriptions alone. Yet what that means… I don't know. Byakko's legend is over and the Seishi Suzuno fought with are dead, just like she is."

Makoto's eyes narrowed and he paused, then tapped the image of Tokaki.

"In that book, Hikari-neesan met up with some Byakko girl or other, didn't she?" He mused.

"Byakko…?" Keisuke frowned. "I haven't read all of Hikari's story, Makkun. You'll have to enlighten me — you probably know more than I do."

"I'm sure of it." Makoto nodded his head. "Hikari-nee met up with a girl called… Toroki, I think it was. Would that make sense? Is Toroki one of Byakko's star people?"

"Yes." Keisuke agreed. "But even if she did, it must have been a

reincarnated form of Toroki. That can happen. Taka's told me clearly enough about the reincarnated Suzaku people who helped them the last time he was able to enter the ShijinTenchishou. Stellar people are blessed by their God and given new lives after their duties are over. Normal lives, perhaps. Or if Hikari met one, maybe not entirely normal."

"Definitely not. She sounded like a freak of nature, t'be honest." Makoto said bluntly. "But I'm pretty sure. Hang on. Have you got the book?"

"Yes." Keisuke rummaged in the pile of papers, producing the battered volume and holding it out. "Here. Can you find it again?"

"I think I can." Makoto nodded. "I remember it because… I remember Neesan when she came back here the first time. I didn't understand it, then. She came back late one night with blood on her clothes and in tears. Noone told me anything, but I saw the blood, and I saw the clothes weren't what she'd been wearing when she left here. She and Dad had a hell of a row that night. I don't think I'd forget it even if I wanted to."

"And Hikari came back with blood on her clothes?"

"Yeah." Makoto agreed, flicking through the aged pages of the ShijinTenchishou as he did so. "When I read this, it struck a chord with me. In the book, it talks about Hikari vanishing and returning to her world after some guy was killed in a cave in Sairou. Right? That's the place you said Arina had probably gone. Isn't it? And she also met this weird girl in a cave in the mountain. Toroki… here we are. She sounds out of her tree, but I'm sure that I'm right."

He held the book out, and Keisuke scanned the passage, running his finger down the columns of characters as he read the section. At length he nodded, letting out a sigh.

"Without a doubt." he agreed. "Not only Toroki, Makkun. The guy who killed Hikari's friend too — Amefuri. They're Byakko's people reborn."

"Well, he doesn't really count." Makoto said dismissively. "He snuffs it towards the end of the story, so he hardly matters. Arina-san's not going to meet him if he's stiffed out already, but I guess what I wondered was if the Toroki woman is there, maybe Arina-san's seen Tokaki and Tatara because they're there too."

"But they wouldn't have been reborn into the same forms as the ones Taka and Miaka knew." Keisuke objected. "And these were

drawn before she went into that world. I don't see how it connects… no matter how much I think of it, it keeps coming back to that. That none of it makes any sense whatsoever."

Makkun slipped off his glasses, polishing them absently on his sleeve before returning them to his nose.

"What if…" He said softly, "It isn't Tokaki and stuff that's been reborn?"

"Makkun?" Keisuke looked startled, and Makoto shrugged.

"It sounds insane, but the whole rest of this is insane, so I'm going to go with it." He said frankly. "What if it's *Arina-san* who's reincarnated? What if that's why she's been pulled into this book place? You said you gave her Suzuno-san's diary, and she saw things in it noone else could see — not even Mother or Father, who'd both been in that world. But they're *Suzaku's* people. Right? I've got that much clear in my mind. Suzuno-san was from Byakko's people. And you said Arina-san must have gone to Sairou. She disappeared into Suzuno-san's grave in Morioka, or something, didn't she? What if that's because she *is* Suzuno-san? What if that's what this is about — and that's why she's got sucked in like this?"

Keisuke stared at his nephew for a moment, and Makoto snorted.

"I know. It's insane. All right." he said, holding up his hands. "It was just an idea."

"No…" Keisuke gripped the book more tightly, re-reading the passage about Toroki, then raising his gaze to his companion. "No, I think you… you might be right. Even if it does sound insane, so does everything that's happened. We've proof right here that Byakko's people have been reborn. What if something happened and others of them were also born again? God, what if *Tatara* was born again? What if… what if Tatara was reborn and somehow called out to Suzuno's soul across the divide? Arina wouldn't know anything about it, but if she *was* Suzuno reborn, then… Tatara would probably still be waiting for her. I saw them, dammit. I saw them disappear into the ether together. What if the pull of their bond is stronger than the start of brand new lives? Maybe it *was* Byakko who pulled Arina into the book world."

"Blech." Makoto grimaced. "Are you telling me that it's a beyond-death love story? Because it was starting to get interesting, and I'll be ticked off if it turns out just to be some endless girl's romance."

"I don't know that it's as simple as that." Keisuke set the book down

on the table. “Because I don’t know whether, if Arina is Suzuno reborn, she was pulled into the other world through Suzuno’s memories of what happened or because Tatara called to her. I don’t know if it’s as simple as that, or if it’s something deeper. But I suppose, given that Hikari encountered Byakko’s people, it must be possible that there are more of them around. Which means… there’s a chance…”

He faltered, and Makoto eyed him keenly.

“A chance…?” He prompted, and Keisuke sighed.

“A chance that Arina might be Byakko no Miko.” He said reluctantly. “If she has Suzuno’s spirit… it can’t be ruled out.”

“It can.” Makoto shook his head. “I told you. Amefuri snuffed it. Even if there were others, there’s already one missing before she even begins. Didn’t you say Miko usually have seven seishi? Hikari was different, but I’m sure it’s what you said.”

“Yes, but Miaka had seen four of hers die before she summoned Suzaku.” Keisuke said gravely. “There are other ways to raise a God. In the absence of Seishi, there’s something else they can use.”

“Something else?” Makoto stared at him, and Keisuke nodded.

“A Shinzahou.” He said softly. “Like your sister.”

“No…”

Arina took a step backwards, feeling the hard wood of the tree trunk digging into her back as she gazed at the approaching wolves, taking in the resolute glitter in their lupine eyes. As one beast they surrounded her, pressing forward as they sensed the excitement of a kill. The front animals had already begun to bare their teeth, saliva dripping from their jaws as their sinewy bodies tensed, ready to pounce for the kill. Her legs shook and gave beneath her as she sank to the floor, unable to even stand up as fear coursed through her entire body.

“Help! Someone, please God, *help me*!” Arina screamed again, covering her eyes as she cowered against the trunk of the tree. Even if she had had the presence of mind to try and climb it, she knew that the beasts were already thinking one step ahead of her, and she huddled against the roots, convinced that at any moment she would feel those terrifyingly sharp teeth plunge into her flesh.

Then, out of the darkness she felt a sharp gust of wind as something

shot through the air in front of her, followed by the sound of a startled yelp, and a thud. For a moment there was silence, then a loud baying began to spread across the pack. Slowly Arina opened her eyes, realising as she did so that the animals who moments before had been less than a foot from her body were now milling in confusion, calling and meandering around the still form of something furry and bloody that lay limp against the snow dusted ground.

For a moment, Arina felt giddy and sick with relief. Then, as realisation sank in, she managed to identify the miserable hump of fur, digesting the fact that moments earlier this wolf had been at the head of the pack, leading the advance.

Something had struck it down… but what?

Arina struggled to her feet, and as she did so, some of the closest wolves turned to stare at her, one or two baring teeth as if still considering the kill despite the loss of their leader. As they took a pace or two towards her, however, tails slashing in the wind, something came hurtling out of the sky, landing within inches of the nearest wolf's paw, and it started, letting out a loud yipping noise as if warning its fellows that whatever had killed their leader was still very much in the area. A second object, followed by a third pierced the snow-soaked ground with a soft thud, and this was enough for the already bewildered wolves as, still baying their displeasure, they took to their heels, fleeing the scene for the safety of the nearby woodland.

In the sudden silence that followed, Arina found herself once more alone on the hillside, and she took a deep, shuddering breath of air into her lungs as she realised that somehow she was still alive.

As her wits began to return to her, she slowly she inched forward, keeping her distance from the corpse of the dead wolf as she observed with some distaste the blood that now pooled out around it.

Protruding from the beast's body was something long and narrow, and as she drew closer, she realised that it was the tail of an arrow, the bolt having pierced straight through the wolf's heart. Her initial instinct had been right then, she reasoned with a jolt. Something had indeed struck the wolves dead as they surrounded her, and though she had not seen anyone else in the clearing, someone had clearly been there.

Still keeping her distance from the dead wolf's corpse, she turned her attention to examining the similar objects that had embedded themselves in the ground around her. Her fingers closed around the nearest, pulling it out and examining it as she dusted soil and grass

matter from the tip.

The arrow was distinctive in its style, and well-carved, the tip polished to a fine point that even its having been fired had not managed to damage. Her heart skipped a beat once more as she realised that whoever had fired it had either been a crack shot who had come to her aid, or a potential assassin who had somehow missed killing her in the darkness and confusion.

In the split-second it had happened, it had seemed like something had decisively struck the animals down. Yet if that was the case, why had the archer not shown himself to her? Why had he concealed his form, if he had come to save her? Was he even now still watching her, waiting for a fresh chance to strike at her as she struggled to come to terms with what had happened?

A prickle ran down her spine at this thought and she got to her feet, turning to glance around her for any sign of the person who had fired the weapons. No matter how hard she looked, however, the landscape seemed to be deserted.

She frowned, now fully alert as she tried to interpret what this meant.

“Not a Meihi, because Bakaru said they don’t use weapons or fight against other peoples.” She murmured to herself. “But then… who? And… *why*?”

She turned back towards the tree, her hand closing more tightly around the arrow as she squinted up against the night sky. Was that something in the branches, or just her imagination?

“Is there anyone there?” She called out hesitantly. “This… I have your arrow, if you want it back. Please, if you are there… will you come out and show yourself to me?”

There was a faint rustle of branches, but no answer was forthcoming, and Arina frowned, gathering all her courage as she put her hands on her hips.

“Look, I know that you saved my life and I’m grateful.” She said finally. “But I’d like to know you were aiming at the wolf and not at me. So if you’re there, at least answer me — all right? I don’t know why you interfered — but it’s hard to say thank you to someone who you can’t see.”

“I only ever hit the things I’m aiming at.” This time a voice did come from the blackness, and Arina visibly started, indignation bristling inside of her as the speaker began to laugh.

“You see, now I’ve frightened you.” He said softly, in tones which sounded completely unrepentant. “You don’t owe me any thanks. It’s all part of the job.”

“The… job?” Arina gathered her wits, frowning. “Where are you? I can’t see you!”

“Look up.” The voice commanded, and Arina bit her lip, gazing up into the branches of the tree. She drew her breath sharply, making out the faint silhouette of a man against the winter foliage, and as she met his gaze, he raised his hand in a mock-salute.

“Glad to be of service.” He said casually. “Be more careful in future, all right? Next time it might be your turn to meet your maker. Those wolves were hungry — you should get out of here before they come back. Go back to your ghostly protectors, girl — this isn’t somewhere a woman should wander alone at night.”

“I’m not helpless, you know.”

“So I saw.” The man’s voice was laced with irony. “You handled those wolves just perfectly, didn’t you?”

“Who the hell are you?” Arina demanded. “And why did you help me, if all you’re going to do is criticise me?”

“I’m trying to give you advice.” The man said simply. “It may one time save your life.”

“You didn’t answer my other question. Who are you?” Arina snapped back, but this time there was no answer, and as she gazed back into the branches she realised that the archer had gone as soundlessly as he had come. She frowned, rubbing her temples.

“The arrow is real, so he was real too.” She murmured, holding it up to examine it as best she could in the moonlight. “He killed the wolf and saved me. But… who is he? And why? This world is weird. I know Hikari said it was dangerous at times, but… what kind of person hides in trees and shoots arrows to protect complete strangers? Not a Meihi — definitely not a Meihi. So… what, then?”

“Arina?” A voice from the clearing made her turn, relief flooding her heart as she made out Kishayi’s pale features, and she hurried towards him, still clutching the arrow in her hands.

“Kishayi.” She exclaimed. “Oh, thank goodness.”

“Arina…” Kishayi frowned, reaching to take the arrow from her. He glanced at her in confusion, then past her to the cooling body of the wolf, its blood congealing and darkening in the cold Hokkan air. His

eyes widened as he met her gaze once more, dropping the arrow on the ground and taking her by the arm. He said something, gesturing in the direction of the village, and Arina took it to mean that he wanted to take her back to the safety of the Meihi settlement. Slowly she nodded her head, inwardly embarrassed by how comforting his sudden appearance had been to her shattered nerves. She flung her arms around him, burying her head in his shoulders as the tension seeped out of her, and Kishayi let out an exclamation of surprise, but did not push her away. Instead, very hesitantly, he hugged her, and something in the warm strength of his touch soothed her mangled wits.

"They would have killed me, but some shadow from the darkness saved me." She reasoned inwardly, not willing to let go of her companion even as he began to guide her back towards the smoke and flame-light that marked the settlement. "I don't know who or why or what really happened. But if he hadn't have been there, I would have been dinner. However irritating he was in what he said, he… he was right. It's not safe out here… and I'm going to stick to Kishayi and the others like glue from now on!"

"Arina!"

As they reached the village borders, Bakaru was waiting for them, anxiety in his violet gaze as he took in her pale face and trembling body. "What happened, child? What were you doing out on the mountain alone in the darkness?"

"I'm sorry… I was silly and I didn't think about dangers." Arina confessed, tears welling in her eyes as she registered her man's genuine concern for her safety. "There were… wolves…"

She faltered, unable to continue, and Kishayi cast her a troubled glance. He said something in rapid Meihi to his companion, whose eyes widened in alarm.

"You were attacked by wolves?" He demanded. "Were you hurt, child? And what's this about arrows? Was someone there with you?"

"He… saved me." Arina got a grip on her composure, meeting the older man's gaze. "I don't know who he was, or why. But he appeared from nowhere and shot the wolves down. And they fled when they realised he meant business. I didn't know why he fired the arrows or why he helped me. He wouldn't tell me his name or even let me see his face. He just said that it was 'part of the job' and that I should be more careful if I didn't want to wind up dead. Then he disappeared."

She swallowed hard, feeling sick as she realised how close she had

come to being savaged.

“I don’t want to talk about it any more.” She murmured. “Please… I’m sorry I wandered away from the village on my own. I won’t again, I promise. I won’t…”

As she faltered, Kishayi’s grip on her tightened, and he asked his superior a question. Bakaru nodded, answering in the same language, and then holding his hand out to the young girl.

“I’ll come with you back to Kaeli’s house, and Kishayi’s going to get you something herbal to calm your nerves and make you settle down.” He said softly. “Whatever happened on the mountain, and whoever it was who came to your aid, you shouldn’t dwell on it too greatly. Be thankful instead that someone did. You’re safe here with us, Arina — its over with now.”

Arina nodded, beyond words as she allowed the older man to guide her gently across the snowy ground to the suddenly welcoming glow of Kaeli’s cottage. Kishayi, after having sent her another concerned look, darted off in the direction of Mikoyi’s residence, and Arina let out her breath in a heavy sigh.

“You’re sure you’re unhurt?” Bakaru asked her, as they reached the house. Arina nodded.

“I’m sure.” She agreed shakily. “They didn’t get a chance to touch me.”

She glanced at him plaintively.

“Do you believe in guardian angels, Bakaru-san?” She asked quizzically, and Bakaru stared at her in surprise.

“Guardian…?”

“I just… that guy seemed to be there *because* he came to protect me from the wolves.” Arina sank down into an empty seat, glancing at her hands. “I can’t explain why, but it seems that way. That he was there to save me. Even though I know nothing about him. It’s just… how it feels.”

She gazed up.

“Do you think that’s possible?”

Bakaru frowned, an unreadable look entering his clever gaze. At length he spread his hands.

“There are many things in this world beyond our understanding.” He said softly. “More than that I do not know. Whoever he was and

whatever his motives, I'm glad he saw fit to save your life. For now, that's enough. You're safe and sound back in the village, and that's more important. If you want, in the morning, we'll talk about it more. But you're still shaking, and I don't want you to dwell on something which must have been so frightening for you. All right? There's plenty of time to discuss it when you've rested. Drink the remedy Kishayi will bring back, and then…"

"I was glad to see Kishayi." Arina murmured absently. "It's strange, Bakaru-san, but I knew when he was there that I was safe. Even though the guy in the tree had killed the wolf and driven the others away from me… it was when Kishayi came that I knew I was safe. Is that silly? It was like he was protecting me, too."

Bakaru's eyes widened for a moment, and he did not answer. Then he sighed, shaking his head.

"I don't think it at all silly." He admitted. "But this conversation serves no purpose now. Kishayi will soon be back."

He smiled.

"If nothing else, I'm glad that you can trust the boy so much after such a short acquaintance." He added. "I think it far safer to put your faith in him than a mysterious archer until we know more about this man and what his motives are."

"I suppose so." Arina acknowledged. "All right. You understand this world a whole lot more than I do — I'm just stumbling around in the dark, really. There're so many things I don't know, even after being with you and your people like this."

"You're a brave child." Bakaru said gently, getting to his feet as the sound of the door heralded Kishayi's return. "I will take my leave of you now… you are in safe hands with Kishayi, even if Kaeli doesn't return tonight. Try not to think on it too greatly, child. You have your life — be grateful simply for that."

With that he was gone, and as Kishayi entered the chamber, mug in hand, Arina let out a sigh, her memory flitting back to the brief conversation with the man in the tree.

"Somehow I think he really was there to save me." She mused, even as she took the herbal liquid from her companion, sipping it dutifully. "I don't know how, but somehow I do. And somehow I have the feeling that I'm going to see him again. Somehow."

In the treetops high above the mountain village, unnoticed by the

Meihi, the shadowy figure flitted from branch to branch, intent on reaching his secluded alcove before a fresh flurry of snow made it impossible to navigate the unfriendly landscape.

As he moved, he ran his encounter with the young girl once more through his head, letting out a snort of derision as he finally reached his destination.

“First a child in Shouki-mura. Now a fool in the mountains.” He muttered. “What are you playing at, Byakko? Is this really the best you can do?”

He grabbed hold of the uneven rock face, pulling himself carefully into the abandoned animal cave and sinking back against the wall. He was tired, he realised, the trip across borders earlier that afternoon having sapped a lot of his strength, and he closed his eyes, allowing himself to relax for the first time since he had set foot once more on solid ground.

“You didn’t give me enough strength for this.” He murmured, an accusing note in his voice. “I know I’m already operating on limited resources, Byakko. If you push me like this all the time, I’m not going to be of any use to anyone. You realise that, don’t you? Appearing and disappearing might be simple for me, and even easier now than before, but carrying a bow and arrow and shooting into the black… do you understand what you’re doing to me? You’re going to exhaust my energy before I’ve even half begun to do what you asked of me.”

“In this form, there are limits to what I can give you.”

The God’s voice echoed once more through his thoughts, and he remembered the fading words trickling over his senses as he had slipped from that place into this.

“*I don’t know how much time there is, but it’s all I can do. You must succeed as best you can with your own wits and skills as well. You are acting on borrowed time, and therefore it is not a perfect situation. But I have noone else to rely on. For both our sakes, you must try. Do not fail me.*”

“Failure, huh?”

The archer opened his eyes, glancing down at the bow and the quiver of arrows which he had dropped carelessly at his side.

Travelling without them would, he knew, make him feel somehow naked, and he allowed himself a rueful smile, reaching a tentative hand out to brush against the distinctive fletching of the nearest barb. At too many points in his past he knew he had relied on his arsenal as

much as his own native strengths, and he realised that in those respects, Byakko had very little influence. He had not been blessed by the God to be an archer. That had been a choice he had made off his own bat, and as he reflected on it, he felt a sense of nostalgia washing over him.

He wasn't always an archer, he knew that only too well. At times in his past he had carried a bow but preferred to rely on the swift sharpness of a polished dagger. Yet he had always known how to aim true, his senses and wits primed for accuracy and success. Now, for the first time in his long and complicated existence, he would have to rely on those native skills far more than the ones he had taught himself.

He let out a heavy sigh.

"Byakko no Miko, huh." He murmured, closing his eyes once more as a faded image of another face flooded his thoughts, two distinctive pigtails trailing over her shoulders as she laughed, pointing at something in the sky beyond. A swell of emotions greeted this memory, and his lips twitched into a rueful smile as he pushed the sensation away.

"That was his failing, not mine." he whispered. "And this time it will have to be different. There's no time for sentimentality."

He pursed his lips.

"But can I really bring this about, with someone like that?" He wondered doubtfully. "Or has Byakko gambled everything on me only to lose?"

Chapter 17

Chapter Sixteen

"Well, if it isn't young Rou Zarin."

At the sound of the voice, the young man glanced up from where he had been sitting polishing his sword, surprise in his expression as he met the gaze of the speaker.

"Or no, shouldn't it be *Captain* Rou now, given the nature of your uniform?"

"Geiyo-san!" Zarin exclaimed, setting his weapon aside and scrambling to his feet, a smile touching his lips. "It's been a long time, but I wouldn't forget your face. You still come to Eiroku as often as you ever did, then, to help the people here who noone else cares to help? I shouldn't be surprised, though, since I know how much you've always been willing to do for other folk hereabouts."

"Indeed." The apothecary offered him a warm grin, yet to the sharp-witted young soldier there was a flicker of hesitation in the older man's gaze. "Though I haven't seen you in these parts for a very long time. Rijou told me you'd turned up here yesterday — so I decided I should make it my business to speak to you as soon as I could."

"Speak to me?" Zarin pursed his lips. "Specifically?"

He eyed his companion keenly, sheathing his weapon as he did so, and he could see the other man eying the bright insignia on his armour as he did so.

"My captaincy is of Sashi-hime's Guard." He explained, before Shirobu could ask the question. "The crest is that of her family — the Ueke, from the Northern Province. I've not done badly, really, since I left Eiroku as a kid of sixteen. It's been a lot of hard work, but I'm now an officer and serving the Prince's consort directly… I have no complaints to make. It's not bad for a lad from this neck of Sairou."

"Decidedly not." Shirobu agreed. "But then I won't say I'm surprised. You always had that air about you, Zarin-kun. You always seemed like the kind of kid who wouldn't let his roots prevent him from doing anything he put his mind to. I'm glad for you, my boy. It's nice to see that people from a city like this can overcome the odds and

make good."

"Yes." Zarin pursed his lips, glancing down briefly at Sashi's Ueke insignia, then up at the older man. "Geiyo-san, why did you want to speak to me specifically? It wasn't about my colours or my position, I'm quite sure. And if you spoke to Rijou-san, you probably know my errand in Eiroku. That being the case, I wouldn't have been surprised to find you wanting to put space between us. , the questions I've been asking are ones that probably aren't so comfortable for your own honoured family, on reflection."

"True enough." Shirobu laughed ruefully. "You're as bright as ever, and I'm glad of it. I'd rather be frank with you, as you're being with me. Yes, Rijou told me you were seeking information about Byakko's people and that you'd come here directly. He seemed to think that it was Miramu that brought you here."

"It was." Zarin owned. "I didn't know Miramu so well myself, though I know he was your step-son and that he committed a… a crime in the city then disappeared, not long before I left to find myself a commission. It stuck in my mind as soon as Sashi-hime told me that she was concerned about the appearance of Byakko's people and whether or not it was a rumour that held truth. I didn't tell her right away that I'd known of someone with Byakko's mark in the past, because I didn't know for absolute certain that that was the case. But after speaking to a few people more closely associated with the event since I arrived here, it seems pretty certain that — whatever the facts of the matter — the general belief here is that Miramu has Amefuri's mark on his throat."

"Had." Shirobu said simply, and Zarin's brows knitted together.

"He disappeared." he replied. "Didn't he? That was what, almost twelve years ago now? I heard from Haku-san that he'd been seen in this area just more than a year and a half ago, and I thought from what people had said that even your family hadn't had anything to do with…"

"Miramu died eighteen months ago, in Kutou." Shirobu said quietly. "Myoume brought his ashes back to Shouki-mura for Anara to scatter. The boy is dead, Zarin. Dead and gone and at peace, Byakko rest him — maybe this time for real."

"I see." Zarin's gaze clouded. "Then my questions are even more uncomfortable ones for your family. I'm sorry, Geiyo-san. I didn't mean to rake over old wounds."

"Talking to me about such wounds is better than talking to Anara

about them, though she's long since been resigned to the situation." Shirobu responded. "But it isn't that which I wanted to talk to you about, not really. Or at least, in part perhaps it was — to save you expending energy looking for someone who's no longer in this world. But there was another matter I wanted to discuss. Just… not here. Eiroku is not a private city, and secrets don't stay secrets for long. Will you ride out of the city with me so we can speak? To Shouki-mura, if you don't mind. Anara will like to see you, I'm sure, grown into such a fine young man — and it's easier to be discreet there."

"That sounds tantalisingly cryptic." Zarin pursed his lips. "It's unlike you, Geiyo-san, to be so furtive."

"Do you mind? It has to be this way, since I've promised myself not to talk any further about it within the city limits."

"No, I suppose not." Zarin shook his head, offering his companion a grin. "It's been some time since I was in this area, . Whatever people say about Eiroku and the mountain region, it's still home to me in a lot of ways. I won't object to an opportunity to see some of the surrounding land. But I can't spend too much time pursuing ghosts, Geiyo-san. I had hoped to find a clue to Miramu's whereabouts in Eiroku, but if he's truly dead…"

"I give you my word that that was no lie." Shirobu said gravely. "He sacrificed his life to protect his sister, in Kutou, eighteen months ago."

"Sacrifice, huh." Zarin became pensive. "From the little I know about Celestial Warriors, that does seem to be a normal rite of passage. To give up everything for a particular cause…"

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"But, as you said, it doesn't help me or my mistress." He admitted. "So I must explore other avenues. I don't truly even know whether or not her fears or the rumours she's heard are true — but it's not up to me to question them. She dispatched me and I must do my best to find out what I can, even if that proves to be nothing in the end."

"You're fond of Sashi-hime, aren't you?" Shirobu realised, as his companion un-tethered his horse, pausing for a moment to nod his head.

"She's a kind person and popular with everyone at court." He agreed. "I want to do what I can to help her find Byakko's people. Something has been troubling her lately, and I think she's afraid of danger on the horizon. The Ueke are well known in Arudo for their

spiritual powers, so even a senseless dolt like me can appreciate that she's probably aware of more than most of us. Either way, she asked me to find any of Byakko's people and to bring them to her so she could speak with them face to face. So if they exist, that's what I have to do."

"If that's the case, let me get my horse from Rijou's inn." Shirobu suggested. "And then we'll ride and talk. You'll understand, once we get away from here, why it is I want to speak only in privacy, so be a little patient, all right?"

"With pleasure." Zarin bowed his head. "I'll be waiting for you, Geiyo-san. You've piqued my interest, now."

Shirobu shot him a wry smile, then disappeared into the alleyway towards Rijou's inn, emerging a short time later atop his own familiar mare. At the sight of him, Zarin quickly mounted his own steed, twitching on the reins as the apothecary led the way towards the city gates. Though many watched them, noone tried to stop them, and as they headed through the stone divides and into open desert, Shirobu let out a heavy sigh.

"I'm sorry." He said softly. "Within Eiroku, ears tend to twitch and stories spread. And my family have been through so much already. In fact, I wouldn't be speaking to you about this — any of this — if it hadn't been her decision to do so. But it was, so… here we are."

"I beg your pardon?" Zarin stared at him in confusion. "Who do you mean, Geiyo-san? Her…? Anara-san, perhaps?"

"No…" Shirobu bit his lip. "To be honest, for her sake, I wish that it could all just be left alone. But I know it can't. Even with Miramu dead."

"I don't understand." Zarin's brows knitted. "You're talking in riddles. Something's troubling you, Geiyo-san — and you want my help?"

"I don't know if it's that." Shirobu sighed once more. "All right. Zarin, you came to this part of the world searching for my step-son, and I can't give you any good news about finding him. It's too late. But… he's not the only person with Byakko's mark in this area. There's another here, too. Within Shouki-mura."

"Another?" Zarin's eyes widened. "Geiyo-san, are you sure?"

"Positive." Shirobu nodded his head. "Although I wish I wasn't, especially in light of your — and the palace's — interest. But I have faith in your character and that you wouldn't be involved in anything

cruel or unjust. Plus, what you said about your mistress puts my heart a little at rest… I don't think I could bear it if Anara had to bury someone else because of Byakko's calling, ."

"So this person… is someone… associated with you and your wife?" Zarin's brain was working quickly. "Someone in the village… a relative?"

"No. Till a short time ago, a complete stranger." Shirobu responded. "The girl is a child, Zarin. A youngster of no more than thirteen at best, though even she isn't entirely sure what her actual age is. She was orphaned — a desert rat, as they like to say in these parts. She had a terrifying experience in the mountains, and fled frightened to the village, where Anara tended her. Anara's become very attached to her, and I know that she'd quite like it if we kept the girl as part of our own family. But… when I told them about your coming… I suppose that changed."

"A child with Byakko's mark?" Zarin frowned, then, "What kind of frightening experience?"

"That's something you'd better hear from her." Shirobu said frankly. "You might even want to ride into the mountains yourself and see the scene, because someone — or something — left a calling card as a warning. Haruka — that's the child's name — decided she ought to speak to you because she feels there's something dark and dangerous in Sairou and that it's going to hurt a lot more people if it's allowed to do so. If your Sashi-hime has had similar premonitions, it suggests Haruka's right — which means that speaking to you was the sensible thing to do."

"I see." Zarin chewed on his lip. "I have to admit, I'm intrigued to meet this child. It will mean my journey hasn't been wasted. And I know that you aren't a man to spin me a tale, Geiyo-san. If you believe she has Byakko's mark, then I'll have to accept that she does."

"I haven't seen her mark myself, nor her power in action, though I understand she has both." Shirobu admitted. "Anara has seen her mark, though, on one occasion. I understand it's in a place which no young girl would welcome a man's attention, so the likelihood of her showing it to you is low. But Haruka is willing to go with you to Arudo, if it can help people in some way. And I'm sure that, if your Princess is as kind as you say, she will induce the child to open up and share her secrets."

"It might be better that way." Zarin admitted. "I don't think I'm qualified to know a stellar mark from a birthmark, to be truthful. I

never saw Miramu's mark, and I don't think I've ever run across the path of another born under any God's blessing. I'm just a soldier doing my duty. I'd rather leave it to Sashi-hime to discover anything that can be of help to Sairou in the long run."

"I think that Anara might ask to come with you — at least as far as Arudo, if you decide to take Haruka with you." Shirobu warned him. "I told you — already my wife has quite taken to this stray. And to be truthful, I won't say I'm not fond of her myself. She has an engaging, mischievous personality underneath her desert manners — though I think perhaps she'd better be instructed on how to address your Princess before she's thrown into royal company. I wouldn't like her to disgrace herself through lack of education."

"I'm slightly concerned about taking a desert rat to the royal palace." Zarin owned. "And to travel alone with a teenage girl might raise all kinds of eyebrows. I would welcome Anara-san's company as far as the capital, Geiyo-san, if you can spare her for such a trip. I remember that she's a strong rider and a smart woman, so she would be an adequate chaperone for this Haruka's protection."

"I suppose that as a Captain of a Guard you have to take those precautions." Shirobu eyed him pensively, and Zarin nodded.

"Especially when the Captain of the Princess Consort's guard." He agreed ruefully. "You're not wrong. But it's a good position and one I like having. Certainly it's better than some of the posts I've held before — so if it means a little sensitivity here and there to feminine interests, I'll play ball."

"Well, that might be all to the good." Shirobu mused. "Haruka really is very young."

They rode in silence for a while, Zarin glancing up at the clear sky as they plotted their course across the desert. Somehow, he reflected absently, the night seemed clearer when draped over the immense shadows of the mountain peaks, and a faint smile touched his lips as he realised despite all his success in Arudo, he had liked finding a reason to come home.

Above his head, the stars of Byakko twinkled brightly, and the young captain pursed his lips, a thoughtful look entering his gaze.

"*I don't know what it means yet, Zarin, but I trust you to find out.*"

His Princess's words rang through his thoughts, uncharacteristic preoccupation in her ebony gaze as she had given her instructions.

"*I do not wish to cause a scene, nor doubt in these people. But I also*

fear the omens for Sairou and for my family most of all. I need you to find what information you can, and if you can, bring them to me so that I can speak to them myself. Maybe then my heart can be at rest — if I can meet their gazes face to face, surely then I'll know whether they truly are the beings of whom the legends speak."

His gaze slid across to his companion, interpreting the tension in the man's posture, and he sighed.

"Geiyo-san, do you believe with your heart and soul that Byakko will come again?" He asked quietly, and Shirobu started, looking surprised.

"Zarin?"

"I know, to doubt in the God is a shameful thing for one who serves so close to the Emperor's court." Zarin looked ashamed. "But this country has known peace for so long. I suppose I find it hard to visualise that it could have anything else. Even in places like Eiroku the situation has improved and I'm sure will continue to improve as time goes on. Heiboutei-heika is a good Emperor and his Lord son just the same kind of man. Lord Neferu and Lady Sashi have a healthy son and the line is strong. Nefuru-sama's sister Ouba-hime is betrothed to the Eastern Emperor, with promise of trade routes re-opening between our land and theirs across the sea for the first time in some years. Everything is growing, not decreasing. There's never been a time when Sairou has been better at ease with itself… I don't understand why Byakko would choose to rise now."

"The God's ways are mysterious." Shirobu admitted. "I'm a simple apothecary and I'm not in a position to analyse them, or understand their meaning. But I have faith, Zarin. Miramu and I had our differences, but I never doubted what he was… not for one moment."

"And this young girl? This… Haruka?"

"I've not seen her power, but I'm inclined to believe." Shirobu responded. "Still, you'll be able to make up your own mind soon enough. They'll be expecting us."

"I can see Anara-san from here." Zarin admitted, slowing his horse's gait as they rode through the centre of the village towards the apothecary's home. "She looks well indeed… I'm glad."

"She'll be startled when she sees you as a grown man, not a boy." Shirobu shot him an amused glance. "She remembers you when you were born — I'm told a woman never forgets a baby she helped birth."

"Geiyo-san!" Despite himself, Zarin reddened, looking sheepish.

“Please. At least let me pretend to have some dignity, even if you have both known me so long as all that.”

“Shirobu! *Zarin-kun?!*” Anara ran forward at this moment, stopping dead as she took in the soldier’s appearance. “Are you really Rou Zarin? It must have been longer than I thought… but no, you were just older than my own son, so I shouldn’t be so surprised!”

“I’m sure I’ve aged far more than you seem to have done, Anara-san.” Zarin dismounted from his horse, bowing his head towards her with a smile. “You look well.”

“As well as the desert allows.” Anara agreed. “Well, even though Shirobu told me you had become a Captain, it’s still an impressive sight. People will be wondering why an Imperial Officer is in the village — perhaps I should invite you in before the local farmers start prettying up their daughters to meet you before you leave.”

She gestured towards the house, and Zarin laughed, nodding his head.

“With pleasure, though I think you’re exaggerating the appeal of my arrival.” He said good-naturedly.

“I’ll take care of the horses.” Shirobu suggested. “Anara, you take Zarin in, and speak to him about business. I won’t be long, I promise — but I suspect it might be best from you.”

“Understood.” Anara agreed, a flicker of something crossing her gaze for the briefest of instants. Then she was leading them into the apothecary’s cottage, and Zarin found he had no time to dwell on it.

“I believe I must bring you both my condolences and my congratulations, Anara-san.” He said instead, as he made himself comfortable in the house’s main solar. “I hadn’t realised how long I had been gone. Geiyo-san told me that you had had grave news of your son, and I’m sorry for it… but people in the city mentioned that your daughter had been married recently, and even begun to think of a family of her own.”

“Your information is not incorrect, on either account.” Anara offered him a sad smile. “Miramu’s death has grieved me less now I can believe he is at peace. As for Myoume, her first child is due in the next month or so, if her letters are to be believed. Kutou is a long way away, but it is a good match and he is a very honourable man. I could not have gotten better if I had asked Byakko directly… and her happiness takes the edge off the other thing a good deal.”

She sighed, spreading her hands.

“You came here seeking Miramu, I know.” She said honestly. “Shirobu has told me. But he is beyond all of us now… dust on the desert wind and nothing more.”

“Indeed.” Zarin bowed his head in acknowledgement of his companion’s grief. “And I did not come here to make your burden worse, Anara-san. Only Geiyo-san mentioned…”

He trailed off, and Anara nodded.

“You’ve come here to speak not to me, but to Haruka.” She said softly. “And she’s been waiting to speak to you, also.”

Her gaze flitted to the door, and Zarin turned, seeing for the first time the young girl who stood there, long dark hair in two messy tails over her shoulders. She was robed in ordinary peasant clothing, the worn coloured sash that tied the dress at the waist somehow emphasising how skinny the child was even under the heavy fabric. She was barefoot, and even though she was clean, Zarin’s keen eyes soon picked up on the worn state of both her finger and toenails, giving away the fact that until very recently she had been living a far rougher life.

It was her eyes, though, that caught his attention most of all, for, despite the child’s youth, they burned with a resolution that suggested the understanding of one much older.

At his attention, Haruka hesitated, then, stiffly and awkwardly, bowed her head.

“You’re Haruka, I take it?” Zarin asked softly, and Haruka raised her gaze, nodding slowly. She did not attempt to speak, and Zarin reached out a hand, gesturing for her to come into the room properly. Haruka hesitated again, meeting Anara’s gaze as if looking for reassurance that she was doing the right thing, and at the woman’s slight smile, she did as she was bidden, crossing the floor until she stood a mere couple of feet away from him.

“What is your family name, Haruka?” Zarin eyed her curiously, and Haruka bit her lip.

“Mai.” She admitted. “But it ain’t any good looking for them, sir. They’re all dead now. It’s just me that’s left.”

“And so you’ve fended for yourself up till now?”

“Yes sir.”

“I see.” Zarin sat back in his seat, offering her a smile. “You don’t need to be so nervous, Haruka. I was born in Eiroku, and I’m no better

born than you, I'm sure. Besides, I haven't come with the intention of hurting you. Quite the opposite. I want to hear your story — if you're sure you want to tell me."

Haruka looked surprised for a moment, then she nodded, dropping down onto the floor and settling herself on her knees as she did so.

"Geiyo-san said you were someone who could be trusted." She said slowly. "An' I don't want anyone else gettin' hurt if there's somethin' I can do about it. So I said it'd be okay to talk to you, an' tell you what I know. It ain't much, not really, but even so — if it helps…"

"Geiyo-san told me you had one of Byakko's marks on your body." Zarin reflected, and at his words, Haruka pinkened, hugging her arms to her chest.

"I'm not showing it to you." She said hurriedly, and Zarin held up his hands.

"I wasn't going to ask you to." He said reassuringly. "I've already come to understand it's in a place that you'd rather not show me. But it is true? You do have such a mark?"

"Yes. I have one."

"And you know what it means?"

"Anara-san told me it was Subaru." Haruka responded seriously. "She read me somethin' from one of her books about it, so I know a little. It makes a bit of sense — I mean, with my magic an' all, that if I'm one of them Byakko people, it'd be her I'd be."

"Will you tell me about your magic?"

"I guess so." Haruka said cautiously. "It's not like I understand it all that good either, really. But I s'pose I see it as, well, fixing stuff."

"Fixing… stuff? What kind of stuff?"

"Any stuff." Haruka shrugged her shoulders. "Though I'm still a bit confused about that bit."

"Byakko's legend describes Subaru as a 'time-weaver'." Anara put in softly at this point. "A Seishi who had the power to accelerate or decelerate time on objects and turn them back or bring them forward to prior or future states. Haru-chan is still young and her magic is still immature, so as yet she's only done very basic things with it. But potentially it's a very strong power indeed. Even a healing power, if used the right way."

"I see." Zarin pursed his lips. "Then will you show me your magic,

Haruka?"

"I…" Haruka faltered, and Zarin frowned.

"Is there a problem?" He asked gently.

Haruka dropped her gaze to the floor.

"I can do it." She said reluctantly. "An' if you really want me to, I will. S'just that last time I did was when Hami an' the chibi died, so I ain't really sure what'll happen if I do."

"Died?" Zarin's eyes widened, and Anara hurried to explain.

"Haruka and some friends were playing in caves in the mountains when Haruka decided to use her magic to fix cracks in an old wall design." She said, casting Haruka a glance as she did so. "What exactly happened next, we're not totally sure about. But from Haruka's testimony it seems that something came out of the wall when her magic touched it. Whatever this force was, it killed the other two children and tried its best to do the same to Haruka. For some reason it wasn't able to, so it disappeared. Haruka ended up here, with us… though we've been to the mountain and examined the scene, there's no sign of whatever it was there now. Just a message carved into the wall by something — '*revenge*'."

"I see." Zarin looked troubled. "I didn't know that something like that had happened."

"We don't believe it was Haruka's magic that was to blame." Shirobu put in at that juncture, entering the room and dropping down into a seat. "But obviously it was an upsetting experience for her, since she lost two close friends and came close to being killed herself. We haven't pushed her to use her magic because of it."

Zarin was silent for a moment, weighing up his options carefully. It was not his job, he knew, to decide whether or not Haruka's story was true. It was simply his duty to gather information and, if possible, bring those claiming to bear Byakko's mark to the palace for Sashi-hime to inspect herself.

"I suppose it doesn't matter, if I see your magic or not." He said at length. "But I must ask you, Haruka, to accompany me to Arudo. My mistress Princess Sashi is eager to meet with Byakko's chosen — and she will probably ask to see your skills, even if you do not want to show them to me here."

"I'm already cool with that. I mean, I'll come to Arudo." Haruka nodded. "Anara-san said she'd come as far as the city, if that was

okay, since I've never been that far before. I guess I'd rather not do any magic till I'm there, though. Even if it's safe for me to, I ain't wantin' to hurt Geiyo-san's house after they've been so kind t'me. An' in Arudo, there'll be lots of soldiers an' shit, won't there? I reckon it'd be safer all round."

"Then I suppose it's decided." Zarin offered her a smile, noting as he did so the flicker of fear that the brave smile she gave him in return did not quite conceal. "We'll go to Arudo, and see Sashi-hime. Tomorrow at dawn, if it's not too inconvenient for you. The sooner we get there the better, the sooner I can speak to my mistress and, I hope very much, put both her and your mind at rest about Sairou's future."

"It seems a shame to be on the move again."

Ouba allowed Sayo to help her down from the carriage, pausing to glance around her for a moment at the bustling market town they had stopped in on their way to the border. It was drawing towards dusk now, as the traders gathered the remains of their produce up into their stalls and carts, ready to shut up shop for the evening, and despite herself the princess stifled a yawn, a rueful look in her eyes.

It had been an early start.

They had left Reizeitei-sama's palace a little after dawn, and the Emperor had come in person to see them off, gracious and accommodating to the last. Chichiri had also been there, Ouba remembered, and a slightly wistful expression touched her features as she remembered the warm hug that had passed between Hikari and her guardian as her new young friend had promised him to take care and write as soon as they reached Shunhou. There had been excitement sparkling in her hazel gaze, Ouba recalled, in direct conflict to the unease that she had felt upon re-boarding the carriage.

Yet this time she knew she was resolved to it, and as Chichiri's words echoed through her thoughts once more, she pushed the self-pitying impulses aside, focusing her attention once more on the path ahead.

She and Kinka had not spoken again about Byakko's involvement, though deep down Ouba was longing to let her friend know that it was okay to confide her secret in her royal mistress. Still, she knew, Kinka was not given to emotional confidences, and the princess knew that she would have to wait until her companion was ready to talk about it in her own time.

"Are you tired, Hime-sama?" Sayo's voice brought her back to the

present and she shrugged, offering him a faint smile.

“I suppose I was getting a little too comfortable at the southern court.” She admitted. “Or is the road from Eiyou east just rockier than the ones before?”

“It’s not the most even of paths, Hime.” Aoiketsu bowed his head towards her apologetically. “But it makes for better speed and, most importantly, it’s known for being safer. Kusou-ken *is* Kounan’s poorest region. And considering the number of times I’ve made the journey between Reizeitei-sama’s court and my Emperor’s in Shunhou, this has proven to be the best route to take to reach the border in safety.”

“I’m not sure I’ve been this way before.” Hikari jumped deftly down beside her travel companion, curiosity in her hazel eyes. “Aoi, did we take this route when we came back from Shunhou the first time? When it was you and Shishi, Maichu, Myoume and I — is this the path we took? This town doesn’t look at all familiar to me.”

“No, we came a different way, then.” Aoiketsu cast her a grin. “But I didn’t know the journey as well as I do now, so it took us a little longer than otherwise it might have on that occasion.”

“Well, so long as it’s a secure place to sleep, I won’t complain.” Kinka put in at that juncture, stepping down from the carriage and smoothing down her skirts. “I’m always uneasy when we’re on the move, so I’m glad that we’ve reached somewhere by nightfall. I don’t like the idea of taking Ouba-hime through unfamiliar tracks in the night… even if that might seem overprotective.”

“It seems good sense to me.” Aoiketsu shook his head. “For a group containing three women to be travelling at night is a huge risk… and one I’d not be willing to take, either.”

“You fuss too much.” Hikari told him frankly. “This is Kounan. Kounan is at peace. There isn’t any danger here.”

“Yes, so you’d like to think.” Aoiketsu cast her an amused smile. “If it makes you happy to look at it that way, Hikari, be my guest. But either way, it’s better we stay the night here. Tomorrow I think we’ll reach Seisen, and I’ll send word to Bouri and the others to notify them that we’ll soon be crossing the border. From there I imagine it’ll be three, or maybe four days ride to Shunhou, once all the preparations are complete. And the sooner we’re there, the happier I’ll be all around.”

“I think that’s a sentiment we all share, Kaiga-dono.” Kinka said frankly. “Well? Are we going to find rooms or stand here in the chill

night air? It's growing darker and even though this is the South, it's still cool at night in the Spring."

"I suppose we'll be masquerading as another travelling merchant family." Ouba reflected, and Aoiketsu nodded his head.

"If that's all right with you, Hime." He agreed. "The less suspicion we draw towards you and your identity, the better."

"I don't mind." Ouba smiled. "Honestly, it's quite fun. I never get a chance not to be a Princess, not really. So it's nice to have a change, now and again."

She turned to Sayo.

"Sayo, will you see to the horses and then join us?" She asked. "They must be as tired as we are, coming over a road like that."

"With pleasure, Hime." Sayo bowed his head towards her, then turned to do as she had asked, and Aoiketsu nodded.

"The innkeeper here is a man of good repute." He said, casting Kinka a glance as he did so. "I'm fairly sure that we should be able to find good rooms for the night with no inconvenience."

"Then we'll do so." Kinka smiled. "Thank you, Kaiga-dono. I appreciate you understanding my concerns."

"Is Kusou-ken really that dangerous a place?" Hikari frowned. "Chichiri said my father was born in Kusou-ken when he was Tamahome… I can't imagine that he came from a really bad place."

"It's not dangerous, exactly." Aoiketsu shook his head. "But there are some very poor regions. More than that, though, until recently the borders between Kounan and Kutou were heavily guarded on both sides of the divide. In the past, when Kutou invaded Kounan, it was across this area of land that suffered the worst in the initial push to reach Eiyou. Many of the people here still remember the slaughter and the destruction that the Eastern Army brought with them during that time. They're naturally suspicious of anyone going East — even more so are they suspicious of people like me, whose accent is clearly from Shunhou."

He smiled ruefully.

"Which is why I prefer to stay in an inn where I know the man in charge." He concluded. "Since he knows I work for Kounan's Emperor as much as Kutou's, and he realises I'm no threat to the people hereabouts."

“Well, we should be all right, shouldn’t we?” Ouba looked surprised. “Kinka and I are Westerners. Sayo too. And Hikari is from Kounan, so she’s a local. There shouldn’t be any problems.”

“No, I agree.” Aoiketsu nodded. “Which is why it’s here that I decided to stop in the first place.”

“I suppose it must be hard for the people here, knowing that all of that happened to them in the past.”

An hour later, as the party of travellers settled down to their evening meal in the inn’s well-lit solar, Ouba drew the subject back to the earlier topic, glancing around her at the other guests as she did so. Most of them were clearly Southerners, even to her inexperienced gaze, and she knew that although her true identity had been concealed, she and her companions had still been carefully observed as ‘foreigners’ to the area. Though noone had been hostile towards them, the Princess had realised with a jolt that Aoiketsu’s words about the people in Kusou-ken had been right. They were still hurting from wounds inflicted twenty years earlier, and despite herself Ouba’s heart went out to them.

“War must be a horrible thing.” She added. “I’m glad that we don’t have that happening in Sairou.”

“I also.” Kinka agreed. “Though I hope that we won’t find it in Kutou either, Hime. Not these days.”

She glanced at Aoiketsu.

“Kaiga-dono seems quite confident that Shunhou is as peaceful a place as Arudo, now.”

“I think so too.” Hikari nodded her head. “I’ve spent time there, after Seiryuu first brought peace to Kutou. A lot of bad things happened there, but now, good things are too. I’m looking forward to seeing how it’s changed since the last time I was there, to be honest. I’m sure it’s changed a lot. There were a lot of things to do.”

“Decidedly.” Aoiketsu smiled. “But I hope you won’t be disappointed.”

“Hikari-dono, is it really true that *you* were the one who raised Seiryuu?” Kinka asked softly, and Hikari looked startled, a faint pink tint touching her cheeks as she nodded her head.

“Yes, though it seems a lifetime ago now.” She replied. “So much happened… before and after that. But yes. With a lot of help, I did.”

“Then Kintsusei-sama will probably be glad to see you, if that’s the

case." Kinka looked thoughtful. "And it can only help Ouba-hime's introduction to him if she arrives at court in your company."

"Kinka, do you always have to think of it from such a political standpoint?" Ouba cast her friend a rueful glance. "Hikari came with us because she wanted to visit her friend in the East and because she thought I'd like to have some extra company. It's got nothing to do with Seiryuu or anything like that."

"No, but even so, I don't think it's a bad thing." Kinka smiled unrepentantly. "I'm sorry, Hime. I've told you before — I have to consider all things that relate to your safety. Even if they sound boring and political to you."

"I suppose so." Ouba sighed, shrugging her shoulders in resignation. "I'm glad I can leave things like that to you, then. I have plenty enough to think about with the fact I'm going to marry this man."

She cast Aoiketsu a glance.

"Three or four days from… Seisen, did you say?"

"Yes. Something like that." Aoiketsu agreed. "Though I'd rather have clearance from the Southern Guard before we leave Seisen and venture into Kutou proper. It's a precaution, but I'd like to know it's done."

"Why?" Kinka glanced up sharply. "I thought you said that the journey wasn't dangerous, travelling through that area."

"All travel is a little dangerous." Aoiketsu said frankly. "The Southern region of Kutou has always been the most uneasy, even within Eastern borders. During the civil war, it's where most of the rebel forces hid and operated from. Many people believed Kounan was supporting them because of that, although there's never been any evidence to suggest it."

His blue eyes darkened.

"According to my information, the You-ke who properly ruled the Southern Province were murdered just before the initial war with Kounan broke out." He said softly. "Since then the region has not had a proper governing family to take control. Many lesser families started squabbling over land, and allying themselves with powerful noble houses who opposed the Emperor when Kintsusei became King and tried to bring peace. They had support and patronage from a man at the Emperor's court who, now, is thankfully no longer a factor in the equation. But even despite that fact, there is no Southern heir. The other regions of Kutou remain somewhat in the hands of nobility loyal

to Kintsusei-sama. But the Southern region is governed by a military guard because even now things there are on a knife-edge."

"Murdered?" Hikari looked startled. "You never told me that before, Aoi!"

"It was never important to do so." Aoiketsu said frankly. "But you know a lot of atrocities happened in Kutou before, during and after that war. It shouldn't come as any surprise."

A faint smile touched his lips.

"I think it was the final catalyst for my mother to act against my father, if you want to know the truth." He added. "My mother was the younger sister of You Kanshi, the last Southern Lord."

"So it should be *your* land then, Kaiga-dono?" Ouba-hime's eyes became wide. "If your mother was the only survivor of the family, surely it should have passed to you?"

"I'm bastard-born, so I have no right to claim anything." Aoiketsu shook his head. "Neither Kaiga land nor You land. It suits me that way, though, because I prefer my current role in all respects. In any case, Kaiga Gin claimed the land belonging to that family shortly before he was killed, on account of his marriage to my mother. Thanks to his influence, the Southern region was poisoned in a long-lasting way. I wouldn't want to be any part of that, since I still carry the Kaiga name."

"I didn't realise." Hikari's gaze softened. "I'm sorry, Aoi. I suppose I didn't think about your mother's family. I mean, I knew that they were nobility too, but…"

"My uncle was said to be a kind man, who resisted the Emperor's attempts to enslave the local tribal settlements." Aoiketsu said evenly. "And that's most likely the reason he was killed. I'm sure he'd be turning in his grave if he knew what had become of the Southern province in his absence. It's tainted land, now. Even the Emperor has to go to some lengths to set that to rights."

"I've often heard that it was in the Southern Province that my father was arrested and brought to Shunhou for trial." Kinka said soberly. "If it's such a hot-bed of dissention, I can understand why he chose there as a good base for his activities. I'm sure, based on what you just said, that he probably found many like-minded wastrels to manipulate while he was there."

"Kinka…" Ouba bit her lip, and Kinka shrugged.

“There’s no point ignoring it.” She said simply. “He was there.”

“War makes people do stupid things. Greed, too.” Aoiketsu said gravely.

“But that doesn’t mean the next generation have to do those things, too.” Hikari reflected. “For example, Aoi and Reizeitei-sama are friends, and Aoi and I are engaged. Aoi’s father killed Reizeitei-sama’s father, and my father killed Aoi’s, during the war. But it’s stupid to hang on to those things when they’re nothing to do with us, exactly. None of us were born then. The same’s true for you, Kinka-dono. Your father fought and did stupid things for whatever reason. But you’re Ouba-hime’s companion, so the rules are different.”

Kinka looked startled for a moment, then she smiled.

“It’s refreshing to hear someone say that.” She admitted. “Much as I’ve been fortunate with the protection and guidance Rouhei-sama has given me since he took me in, I know there are still people at court in Arudo who look at me as Kei Engai’s daughter. I’m always going to be at least a little bit tainted by blood association there… I hope it won’t be the same, when we finally reach Shunhou.”

“I doubt it will.” Aoiketsu said wisely. “In any case, the Southern region has seen fierce battle in the past, but should be safe enough now. Three of my former comrades are involved in peace-keeping there, and all of them are men I trust. I know that if I can get word to them of our arrival, they’ll do whatever they can to help us. A full escort might be unwise, since it’ll draw attention to our party. But even so, I’m sure it’ll be an advantage to have friends in high places, as it were.”

“This is where having you travel with us is an advantage in itself, then.” Kinka reflected. “I suppose it does help, to have a native along for the ride.”

“Well, so long as all goes as smoothly as it has done so far, that’s all I ask.” Aoiketsu said wryly. “So long as by nightfall tomorrow we’ve reached Seisen then the hardest part of our journey will probably be over.”

So that was the way the wind blew.

Bakaru stood at the edge of the mountain clearing, a frown on his face as he scanned the landscape for evidence of the previous evening’s excursions. Though more snow had fallen during the night, the frozen corpse of the wolf was still clearly visible and he paused for

a moment, then knelt beside it, eying the arrow that had ended the creature's life with careful, meticulous precision.

Though he was drawing on in years, and though his past had at times aged him, there was little wrong with his eyesight and in the fresh light of day he could clearly see the etchings on the barb's carved shaft which marked it out as a custom made object. During his time as a slave in the East he had seen many such weapons and his frown deepened as he sat back on his heels, mindless of the damp chill of the morning dew and the gently melting white blanket that surrounded the unforgiving crags.

Someone had clearly been here. A shadow, Arina had called him, who had not given her his name but who had been in the branches above, waiting and watching for a chance to intervene. Had he been there truly for the girl's benefit? Bakaru paused for a moment, ruminating on this, before letting out a sigh, shaking his head. Although the arrows had clearly been fired by someone with a keen eye and well-polished skills, he was unable to sense any lingering aura around the barb, and it was as though somehow the night's snowfall had washed all trace of the enigmatic figure away.

"What are you looking for, old man?"

A voice startled him and he glanced up, making out for the first time a dark-clad figure standing beneath the trees on the ledge just beyond. He pursed his lips, getting to his feet and dusting the snow from his gown as he registered the bow slung casually across the stranger's back.

"I imagine that it's not a what, but a whom." He said gravely. "I suspect that what I am seeking may well be *you*, traveller."

"Me?" The man smiled, a lazy smile which did not give any indication of either discomfort or surprise. He shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps. Though even if you're so interested in what happened here last night, I'm surprised you came in person. You must be really curious about the person who shot those arrows, mustn't you? Or are the Meihi so against killing that even the death of a beast is abhorrent to your ways?"

"I do not believe in unnecessary killing." Bakaru said mildly, casting a glance at the wolf corpse once more, then back at the stranger. "But I also spent much of my life in Kutou, and know that sometimes there is no helping it. You slew the wolf and saved Arina's life, I think. In that instance, I believe I am indebted to you — I certainly did not come here to make criticism of your methods."

“You are a canny soul.” The stranger lounged up against the tree, seemingly in no hurry to retreat. “But then I should’ve known that you would be. My experience with Meihi has taught me that you’re a people not to be underestimated. And you most of all, I think. Genbu no Urumiya.”

“Ah.” A faint smile touched Bakaru’s lips and he clasped his hands together, slowly shaking his head. “No, my friend. You are mistaken. I do not carry that name — not now and not before.”

“I’m not foolish.” The man responded evenly. “I can sense it, radiating from you like a beacon. We are not so different, you know. You need not lie to me. It’s futile in any case. I know who you are, even if I don’t know your name. You’re the one who runs this village, sure enough. But you’re also Genbu’s lackey, too. The one he chose to guard something… a long long time ago.”

“I will not dispute anything you’ve said.” Bakaru agreed lightly. “Except for one thing. I am not Urumiya. The mark of Urumiya is carried in the souls of two people. My brother Bachisu carried the other half, and he is now dead. With his life over, I cannot be called Urumiya again. Genbu’s power stirs slowly inside of me, perhaps. You are not incorrect. But I am not a Seishi, my friend. I simply carry the traces of it, that’s all.”

“A split soul, huh.” The stranger looked interested, then he shrugged. “Either way, it doesn’t matter much to me. I didn’t come here to talk about Genbu.”

“No.” Bakaru’s eyes narrowed, and he eyed the other man pensively for a moment. Then,

“You came to talk about Byakko, didn’t you?”

“So you did already realise that? I’ve given you too little credit.” Despite himself the stranger looked grudgingly impressed. “You don’t know who I am or anything about me… and I know you can’t sense my presence, even though you can see me standing here in front of you. We’ve never met before, yet even despite that you have an inkling who I am and why I came? You impress me, old man. As expected, you Meihi truly are no fools.”

“I don’t know about that.” Bakaru bowed his head in acknowledgement of the man’s words. “But of late I have come more and more to believe that Arina’s being here has something to do with Sairou and Byakko. She has come here from a world away from this one, carrying a book blessed in some way by Western magic, though I do not pretend to understand its meaning. And now you are here…

she said herself it was like having a guardian angel who had come simply to save her from the wolves. Is that not true, stranger? Did you not come here with that in mind?"

"I suppose I did, in one way or another." The man admitted. "Though more to find her than to save her life. Still, since I was in the area…"

He shrugged carelessly.

"It was convenient to do that as well."

"Will you not then tell me your name, stranger?"

"It wouldn't do any good if I did." The man shook his head. "And names are not important… not yet. There are more pressing matters. You know, I think, that the girl you protect is more than she seems in a lot of ways?"

"I know." Bakaru agreed. "Any child of that world is something more than what she seems. She is not the first I have met from that place. I know a little about stellar legends, even if I am only a reincarnated form of Urumiya and not the original soul."

"You and I both." The man responded, and Bakaru smiled.

"Then you are, as I think you are, a guardian of Byakko?"

"Perhaps."

"And because of it, you can conceal your life force from me completely? Perhaps from anyone at all, regardless of their skill?"

"More or less." The stranger agreed.

"Then would I be foolish to suggest the reason for your being here is that Arina is not just a stray from that world but in fact sent here with a purpose, even though she does not know what that purpose is yet?"

"I would have thought that obvious. I don't spend time babysitting strange girls for fun."

Bakaru sighed, glancing at his scar-mottled hands. Then he raised his gaze.

"She is Byakko no Miko, isn't she, stranger?"

The man did not reply, but in his seiran gaze Bakaru knew he had his answer. He pursed his lips, his heart both heavy and relieved as his vague suspicions solidified into something more tangible.

“Then tell me, if you please, why it is she is here on our mountain? She is far from the land that needs her… why should one such as that be sent to a place such as this? It has troubled me since the start — since I first realised she had some connection to Western magic. This is Hokkan. Why should she be here?”

“You know the answer to that, old man, even if you want to pretend you do not.”

Bakaru’s eyes widened, and he stared at the stranger in dismay as a cold chill curled itself around his heart.

“Kishayi.” He whispered, and the man chuckled.

“You look as though you’ve seen a ghost all of a sudden.” He said ironically, pulling an arrow from his quiver and twirling it casually between his fingers. “You knew though, didn’t you? You must have known. If you truly suspect that that girl is Byakko no Miko in any respect, then you of all people should understand what that means.”

Bakaru’s brows knitted together.

“Kishayi was born in the West, even though he fears the world outside this village.” He murmured. “I have been slow not to realise before what such a thing could mean. No Meihi live in the West. Kaeli brought him here because it was too harsh to raise the boy in the desert climate. Yet even so, Kishayi was born in that climate. He is from Sairou just as sure as I am from Hokkan.”

“Kishayi is the boy who came to her after I killed the wolf last night, is he? That’s his name?”

“Yes.” Bakaru rubbed his temples, and the stranger snorted.

“On skin so pale as yours it’s not surprising you never saw anything to make you suspicious.” He said softly. “Byakko’s mark is as white as the snow you’re standing in, old man. Can you even see such a thing on Meihi skin? I don’t know. But I will tell you this. Even if you don’t see it, the mark is there. And no matter how you try to protect him — or either of them — you won’t be able to do anything at all. It’s already begun. From the moment he met the girl, his destiny changed. He’s no longer one of your mountain Meihi. He’s one of Byakko’s people. And you will soon have to let him go.”

“I had already feared this.” Bakaru admitted. “When I heard that Arina’s book had reacted to his touch. But more… Kishayi has always been unlike his fellows in some ways. I cannot explain it, but I’ve always known it. And now I understand why. Why despite Kaeli’s hardship and suffering he was born alive. And why, despite the odds,

he survived to adulthood. This is why. The Gods move again. And I don't know how to explain it to him… a boy raised with nothing but Bali's ways in his heart."

"You Meihi and your superstitions." The stranger said with a heavy sigh. "Oh well. Since you know it, there's no point me spending more time enlarging on it. That's why I came here, old man. I knew if anyone would understand the significance of that girl in these parts, it would be one of Genbu's people. Your intelligence hasn't disappointed me."

"What would you have me do, archer of Byakko?" Bakaru asked honestly, gazing at the stranger with a level, enquiring gaze. "You have not come here by accident but by design. You must then require something of me, too?"

The man's eyes narrowed, and Bakaru saw a flicker of something deep within their depths.

"Tell me, old man, are your people all as tied together as I think they are?" He asked softly. "If I said the name Tou Hyoushin, would you understand what man I meant?"

"That is a Chinese name." Bakaru said evenly. "But yes. I know the man of whom you speak."

"Then you have communications outside of this village?"

"I do. But if it is a request for me to contact Lilaihi, then it is already done. I sought his help before you came here — if that is all, you need not worry."

"Hyoushin… or whatever you call him… he's nothing to do with this." The man shook his head. "It's not him that concerns me."

"His wife, then?" Bakaru pursed his lips. "The girl who carries the mark of Toroki?"

There was silence, and Bakaru nodded his head.

"I see." He said quietly. "You have some fondness for that one, don't you?"

"You should worry about the stray in your midst more than trying to work out my mind or my motives." The stranger spoke coolly, removing the head of the arrow and tossing it across the divide to the surprised Meihi. Bakaru caught it, turning it over in his fingers, and as he did so, he caught sight of the engraved image of a tiger carved on the shining silver surface.

“Byakko needs that girl alive.” The stranger said simply. “At present she is yours, but if you have had the presence of mind to contact Hyoushin, she will soon be on the move. The world is a dangerous place, old man. There are dark forces stirring and they will try to kill her — her and all those who shelter her. Your village too may come under threat, so remove her from this place as soon as you can. Her and the boy — he too will draw danger here, and if you want to keep your peaceful life, they must both leave Hokkan’s mountains.”

“And if I am not afraid to face danger?”

“You should put your villagers first.” The stranger said acidly. “And heed my warning. Whether you seek to help her or not, by keeping her here you put their lives at risk. This is not a force you and your half-formed magic can overcome. If you have such contact with Shunhou and have the means to do it, then send to them for aid and have them both taken from this place. They can do noone any good on a remote mountain such as this.”

“I see.” Bakaru became sombre. “So instead I should wish the danger onto Hyoushin and his new wife, by sending them to Shunhou’s court?”

“I don’t wish for you to do any such thing.” For a moment the stranger’s eyes softened, and Bakaru saw genuine regret in the man’s blue eyes. “I care nothing for a mountainful of Meihi, whereas the death of Tou Myoume would please me none at all. But I’m not here on my own will. I’m here on Byakko’s. Whether I consider her a fool or not, that waif of yours must be protected. She must be *alive*. Her young companion too. This darkness has stirred for a long time. There is only one way of resolving it… for the Miko to raise Byakko and put an end to something that should have been ended a hundred years ago.”

“So you and your fellows are reborn for that purpose.” Bakaru said slowly. “I understand. With luck, Lilaihi will consent to help us, and if so, word should reach him of Arina’s arrival soon. But should the girl not go to Sairou? If you think…”

“Sairou’s capital is not a safe place for her or for any of Byakko’s people, so things stand.” The man shook his head. “I’ve already told you far too much and wasted far too much of both our time. But I feel at least you won’t share my words irresponsibly. I’m right, aren’t I? If I ask it of you, you won’t mention them even to the girl herself.”

“If you ask it of me, then I will give you my word and be bound by it for good.” Bakaru agreed. “But do you ask it of me? To send them

on a journey without knowing their purpose for making it?"

"It's better that way, at the moment." The stranger became serious. "The danger in Arudo is not confined to that place, and I find it hard to predict the enemy's movements accurately, even with the knowledge I have. As yet none of Byakko's other people are in a strong position to fight. Some are not even awoken fully. If any of them are killed before they are all brought together, then the game is up. There are no second chances. Byakko has already gambled all of his residual strength and magic on making sure I'm able to carry out his tasks. There is no room for error. Whether they know the danger they face or not won't make a difference to their ability to fight it — not yet. It will only add to their fear and cause them to make silly mistakes. At least if they can reach Shunhou they might have some mode of protection and a possibility of learning all the things they need to know. Please trust me in this, old man. I don't speak lightly… but there isn't any time for hesitation."

Bakaru eyed the man carefully, noting for the first time the faint glimmer of white light that danced across the man's throat. He narrowed his gaze, making out the distinctive lines of the character, and then, with a shrug, he smiled.

"If that is your wish." He said quietly. "I will do as you ask, Amefuri of Byakko."

Despite himself, the man's eyes widened in surprise, and Bakaru let out a low chuckle.

"I am a man of the stars, just as you are." He said, gesturing across the divide. "I know the marks of your God as well as I know my own. I do read, you know. That character is unmistakeable. And now I know who you are, my mind is somewhat at rest. I shall follow your request to the letter, you needn't worry about that. Once word has come from Lilaihi I will see about making sure both Arina and Kishayi can get to Shunhou without making either of them consider the things you've told me. Only in return, I hope I can ask one thing of you, too."

"One thing?" Amefuri raised an eyebrow, and Bakaru nodded.

"Watch over them from the shadows, with whatever power Byakko has invested in you." He begged. "They are young too. Too young to be put into such danger without any protection."

"That's my duty even without you asking me." Amefuri assured him. "You needn't worry. It's already my intention."

With that he smiled, offering the old man a mischievous wink.

Then, as if melting away, his form faded and disappeared into the mottled darkness of the trees, and Bakaru found himself once more left alone.

He glanced at the arrowhead once more, eying the delicate outlines of the tiger's head. It had been well done, he realised absently, with skill that would rival a Meihi's own.

"So it begins again." He murmured, feeling the wintry breeze blow through his long silver hair as he turned back towards the village. "This time for the Tiger. Will they ever be at an end, I wonder? Or is it eternal, this cycle of Miko and stars uniting to bring about change? Does our world truly rely on such things?"

"Bakaru?"

Kishayi's voice startled him from his reverie and he paused, sliding the arrowhead into the sash of his robe as he offered the young boy a grin.

"Why have you walked out this far?" Kishayi seemed perplexed, eying his elder in confusion. "When Mother told me you'd come here…"

"I wanted to see the scene for myself in the light of day." Bakaru said simply. "It seems that Arina was fortunate to escape with her life."

"Yes." Kishayi's expression became shadowed, and Bakaru eyed him keenly.

"Is something wrong, my boy?" He asked gently, and Kishayi shook his head.

"Not really." He said slowly. "It's just… I feel a little bit like…"

He faltered, and Bakaru rested a gentle hand on his companion's shoulder.

"You wish you'd been there to drive the wolves away first?" He asked softly. Kishayi nodded.

"I've not been as good or as helpful to Arina as I should have been." He said helplessly. "I saved her from the snow, but since then I've run from her in fear because of her differences, and last night I was slow to hear her scream — I might have got there to find her… if not for the stranger in the trees."

"But thankfully it wasn't that way." Bakaru said pragmatically. "Still, it shows that your sense of adulthood is beginning to stir inside

of you, doesn't it, if you can think of it in that regard? I don't think you have anything to blame yourself for. The misunderstanding of a few days ago is past, and should be forgotten. More important is the fact that Arina trusts you *now* — and you did come, even if in the end it wasn't you who saved her life."

"I feel like it should have been."

"Because you saved her once, it should always be that way?"

"Maybe." Kishayi looked surprised. "I don't know. I've been thinking a lot since we had that talk about my attitude towards her, Bakaru. Even though I can't communicate with her directly, I feel like I should be the one protecting her. I did find her, and somehow… I don't think it was an accident. I mean, if I hadn't been there… I sort of wonder if she would have been at all."

"What do you mean?" Bakaru was startled, and Kishayi shrugged.

"I don't know." He admitted. "I really don't know. I just feel… she and I were there at the same time for a reason. She's from outside, but she's not like other outsiders — I know that, even if I can't ask her about it myself. She's different. It's almost… like she came from the sky. From Bali. To make me not afraid of outsiders in some way."

Bakaru eyed the boy for a moment, then he laughed, putting a companionable arm around his shoulders.

"Whatever you want to think of it is as is fine by me." He assured him. "I think that Arina's lucky you did find her, myself. And I think… no, I know that these feelings of yours — whatever they do mean — shouldn't be feared or ignored. If you want to protect her, my boy, then do so. If that's how you want to prove yourself as a man of this tribe, then by all means do it. Arina *does* trust you. If you're coming to trust her too, then nothing would make me happier."

For a while they walked back towards the village in silence, then, as they reached the boundary, Kishayi raised his gaze to his elder's.

"Arina will go to Shunhou, won't she? To Lilaihi."

"Yes. Almost without a doubt."

"Bakaru… if I wasn't here, you'd take care of Mother for me, wouldn't you?"

"Take care of?" Bakaru stared. "Kishayi, I don't think Kaeli needs much taking care of."

"But if I wasn't… you'd make sure she was all right?"

“Why? Do you plan not to be here?”

There was another long silence, then Kishayi let out a heavy sigh. Slowly he nodded his head.

“Last night Arina might have been gone forever.” He said quietly, kicking absently at the snow as he did so. “And I didn’t like that. But when she goes to Shunhou, she’ll be gone too. I won’t see her again — she won’t come back. So if I want to find a way to talk to her — if I want to get to the point where we can speak properly — I guess that won’t do. She has to leave the village, because it’s too cold here and she’s not a Meihi. So she can’t stay. Which means…”

“Which means?” Bakaru prompted gently, and Kishayi’s amethyst eyes glittered with resolution.

“Which means I want to go *with* her.” He said frankly. “To Lilaihi. In Shunhou.”

Chapter 18

Chapter Seventeen
:::Flashback:::
The Shifu road, a century earlier

"I wish we could stay beside the sea forever."

As they walked along the sea front, Suzuno let out a heavy sigh, gazing out across the blue horizon with a wistful look in her eyes. "It's so peaceful and beautiful here, somehow. I wish we didn't have to leave. I like Kaidou a lot, even though we've only just got here."

"You're such a tourist, aren't you?" Subaru scolded lightly. "Believe me, it's no different here from any other big town in Sairou. Sure, there're people coming and going all the time, because of the trade. That's logical. But it has its problems, too. Crime, and other things. It's certainly no seaside paradise."

"Are we okay here, walking openly like this, if you're intending to run away?" Tatara cast Subaru a quizzical look. "Won't your employer cause trouble for us if you're spotted here in the city?"

"Possibly." Subaru acknowledged. "But we're almost at the city gates. We can follow the coastal road as far as Shifu, and once we've left Kaidou, he won't have any claim on me, anyhow. For all he'll know, I might've got on a boat and left for far away lands. He won't waste time and money looking for me if he can hire another girl for half the price he was paying me."

"The coastal road, huh." Tokaki frowned, his gaze flitting to the path ahead of them. "Is Shifu where we should be going, though? I mean, is there any reason why we would go there? It's not like we know anything about another celestial warrior being there. Wouldn't it be out of our way?"

"You mean you do have a game plan?" Subaru looked surprised. "I thought you were just roaming around picking up strays en route. Was I wrong?"

"That's a crushing judgement." Toroki grinned. "Though it's not too far wrong. We have had some help, Subaru. We were given the clue of coming to Kaidou to find you. So it's not completely just a matter of luck."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean offence." Subaru returned the grin. "Just, a

group of travellers who call each other by odd nicknames and don't seem to have any particular plan of action… I suppose I hadn't considered the fact that there is a bigger picture at work."

She spread her hands.

"It's almost exciting, to be on the run again." She murmured, as they passed through the city gates and out onto the open road ahead. "Out in the wilds, free and unfettered."

"On the run again?" Suzuno echoed, and Subaru giggled.

"Not like it sounds." She said frankly. "I'm not a law breaker or an outlaw, nothing like that. It's just that I was born some miles from here, originally. Mother just decided to come back to Kaidou when Father died. She was born Zanji, and she wanted to live among her people's land, by the sea. She always missed the sea, when she was in the North. It was a long journey — it took us two or three weeks, all in all. But it was an adventure. And I'm starting to remember what that was like, making ends meet as we went along. Living on our wits, I suppose — it was good preparation for supporting myself in Kaidou."

She shrugged.

"Mother's health was never robust, so she couldn't work for very long hours." She added. "That meant I was the one who had to do most of the earning when it came to food and such things."

"You're not just saying that, are you?" Suzuno looked anxious. "So that we don't feel guilty about taking you away from your home and your job in Kaidou? Before, you didn't really sound like you wanted to go."

"If you have something, it's a wrench to let it go. Especially if you've worked hard for it." Subaru responded. "But once the decision's been made, it's better to just go with it. I'm not a very material person, either. I don't cling onto things so much as some people do. Now I've made up my mind to travel with you, my focus is entirely on the road ahead. Don't worry about me, Suzuno. I'm fine."

"I'm glad you weren't against coming." Tokaki reflected. "One more Byakko warrior is one less person to find."

"But it does raise the question of where we should be heading next." Tatara mused. "If Shifu is no good — and Tokaki is right. We've no reason to go that far along the coast."

"Should we try and contact Taiitsukun again? And ask for another clue?" Suzuno wondered. Toroki shook her head.

"She said before that she couldn't do your job for you." She

remembered. “She’d get us to Kaidou, but that we had to use our own initiatives, too. We can’t ask her to nanny us. This is our duty. All of us have to be strong enough as a team to be able to raise a God and use that power to save this land from all its enemies. That’s some end goal — if we’re treated with kid gloves all the time, we’ll never reach it.”

“Toroki’s right.” Tokaki flexed and unflexed his arm. “We don’t need hints, anyway. We can do this on our own. We’re strong enough. We already used our skills to save a village from destruction,”

“You’re posing.” Toroki said cuttingly. “Stop swaggering, Tokaki.”

“I’m not swaggering.” Tokaki snapped back. “It happens to be true.”

“You’re too cute.” Subaru looked amused. “All right, Tokaki-kun. Where do you think we should go next, then? You sound like you’ve got something in mind.”

“Yes.” Tokaki nodded. “I think we should go to Arudo.”

“No.” Toroki said firmly, holding up her hands. “I already said, didn’t I? We’re not going to the capital. It’s dangerous.”

“And you also said that we couldn’t be mollycoddled the whole way.” Tokaki retorted. “So it’s dangerous? So what. We’re Seishi, aren’t we? We’re not supposed to always take the safe route. Besides, Taiitsukun said very plainly that we should be heading to the capital. We should have gone there right away. Enough running away. If there’s one of us there, we should be going to find them. No matter what it takes.”

“That seems logical.” Tatara nodded. “Taiitsukun did say that there was someone in Arudo who had Byakko’s mark. And we have no clues to the wherabouts of any other Seishi.”

“I said no, didn’t I?” Toroki snapped.

“And you’re not our boss.” Tokaki returned neatly. “If anyone should make the decision, it should be Suzuno. Not you. Even if you do see the future, Toroki, you don’t know it all. We came to Kaidou because Suzuno decided it was the best idea. Not because you stamped your foot and refused to go to the capital.”

“Stop it, both of you.” Suzuno begged, holding up her hands. “I don’t want you to argue over it.”

“Going to Arudo is too dangerous.” Toroki said in low tones. “I know a lot more than you do, Tokaki, so you should listen. I’m not just stamping my foot and refusing. I have good reason to stay away.”

“Then give it, if that’s the case.” Tokaki challenged. “If there’s a reason,

Toroki-san, tell us what it is. You can't just expect us to listen and follow your words if you aren't giving us all the information."

Suzuno bit her lip, casting Toroki a hesitant glance, and Toroki sighed, slipping her glove from her hand and rubbing her fingers together to create a soft white haze of light.

"Watch." She said curtly. "I don't need to tell you. I'll show you, instead."

"Toroki, you don't have to…" Suzuno began, but Toroki shook her head.

"Just watch." She said briefly, and Suzuno frowned, but did as she was bidden, as the hazy images began to grow clearer.

"If we go to Arudo, there will be conflict." Toroki said quietly. "If we go there, we will find ourselves in the lair of the most dangerous person in all of Sairou. And her followers too, I hasten to add. They will attack us. And I do not know whether or not we will escape."

She twitched her fingers, and Suzuno saw the image of the swift-moving shadow coming at Tokaki from the darkness over again.

"Hey! That's me!" Tokaki exclaimed, and Toroki nodded.

"Do you see now, you idiot?" She demanded. "If we go to Arudo, you're going to be attacked and I don't know how badly you might be hurt. In protecting Suzuno in that environment which none of us are prepared for, we could take injuries. More, we could be killed. Arudo's court is a hotbed of heresy at the moment. Byakko's people are hardly going to be welcomed by the Imperial Family."

She clasped her hands together as the images disappeared.

"Now do you believe me?" She continued. "I have good reasons for us not going there yet. We need to be stronger. We need to be much stronger."

Tokaki's eyes narrowed, and he pursed his lips.

"And this warrior of Byakko? What of them? They're there, right?" He asked slowly. Toroki nodded.

"You just saw him." She said darkly.

"Pardon me?" Subaru blinked. "I thought that was Tokaki-kun here. What do you mean? There was another one, too?"

"Yes." Toroki turned to face her fellow Seishi with sombre eyes. "The one who attacked him. The shadow who shot from the darkness. That one is the Seishi known as Amefuri. He is nothing more than a puppet of

whoever is in charge in Sairou, and at present that means the Empress Makiko — the woman who brought the heresy to the Western court in the first place."

"Shit." Tokaki murmured. "That makes it complicated, doesn't it? If he's already sold out to the other side."

"Yes." Toroki said shortly. "Don't shoot your mouth off before you know all the facts, Tokaki. I'm not trying to be difficult. I'm trying to keep all of Byakko's Seishi alive till the final round."

"This is a problem." Tatara sighed. "But… Toroki-san, how confident are you in the accuracy of your visions?"

"One hundred percent. Why?"

"And your ability to change them?"

"Less so." Toroki admitted. "I've never yet been able to prevent anything I've seen from happening, no matter how hard I try."

"In which case, it doesn't matter, does it, if we go to Arudo now or later?" Tokaki realised, shooting Tatara a glance. "That's what you mean, isn't it? If Toroki's had that vision, it means that either way it will happen. Even if we get stronger — so will our enemy, and the same thing will come to pass. In the meantime, we're wasting time, because we don't know where any other Seishi are. If this guy's Amefuri, then we should at least try and bring him over to our side. We have to try."

"And you're all right with the fact he might slit your throat?" Toroki demanded. "You don't understand what kind of opponent you're facing. He's no ordinary fighter. Even with your martial techniques, Tokaki, I doubt you could best him."

"Don't know until I try." Tokaki shrugged, and Suzuno grimaced, recognising the swagger returning to the Seishi's tones. "I can teleport too, don't forget. I'm pretty quick."

"Yes, but he can suppress his energy and do more or less the same thing." Toroki said, her expression troubled. "More, he can conceal himself completely from people's sight and senses. You might not know he was there till he had a blade inserted between your ribs. I'm serious, Tokaki. This is not an easy win. It's dangerous."

"But unavoidable." Tatara murmured. "By your own word, Toroki, your visions always come true."

"Tatara and Tokaki are right." Suzuno sighed, smoothing her skirt. "Taiitsukun said it too — that we shouldn't put it off because we might regret it if we did. We should go to Arudo, Toroki. I'm sorry, because I

know better than anyone else how you feel about it. But it's the only thing we can do. We might not be very strong yet, but even so, we have to head that way. We have to try and convince Amefuri to fight in Byakko's name. The sooner we start doing that, the sooner we can find the other two, too. Maybe there will be more clues in Arudo — or perhaps we'll find them on the way. Either way, there's no choice. We have to go to Arudo."

Toroki looked rebellious for a moment. Then she sighed, slowly sliding the glove back onto her right hand.

"I know." She murmured. "But I had hoped… that it wouldn't have to be yet."

"You know a lot about this Amefuri, don't you?" Subaru asked thoughtfully. "Is that your ability, Toroki, or do you actually know him?"

"Know is a difficult term to define." Toroki sighed. "No, I wouldn't say I know him. But everything I've told you is true."

"Speaking of abilities, Subaru, what did you mean earlier when you said you'd send me back to puberty?" Tokaki cast the newest group member a questioning glance. "Is it something that you might be able to use if we wound up fighting this guy?"

"Toroki's vision showed you fighting, not me, so it won't happen that way." Subaru shook her head. "Besides, my power isn't really designed for combat. I told you, it's easier to show than to tell. And right now isn't the best time to show it — an opportunity hasn't arisen yet where it's appropriate to use it. But you'll see soon enough, no doubt."

She smiled.

"I think we should head for Arudo, too." She added. "If the action is there, so should we be."

"In which case, we should leave the coastal road completely and head inland." Tatara said frankly, raising an arm to indicate a turning to the left. "It crosses the river in a couple of places, but if we take that path we should be heading in the right direction. It's a good three day's travel by foot at the very least to Arudo, so we shouldn't waste time with any unnecessary meanders."

"At Suzuno's pace, it'll probably be more like four or five." Tokaki cast the young girl a thoughtful look, and Suzuno scowled.

"It's not my fault if I'm not as used to trekking through places as you all are." She defended herself. "In my world we have other ways of getting around… would it really hurt you so much to at least have a few bicycles to make life easier?"

“Bicycle?” Subaru blinked, and Suzuno sighed.

“Never mind.” She said heavily. “We’re turning left, right?”

“Yes, we’re turning left.” Tatara agreed. “If you become tired, Suzuno-sama, I’m sure Tokaki or I could carry you for a while, also. You shouldn’t concern yourself — we’ll manage just fine.”

“She’s heavier than she looks, Tatara.” Tokaki warned. “Trust me — I’ve done the carrying thing already. She might look light as a feather, but…”

“Did noone ever tell you that it’s rude to talk about a girl’s weight, Tokaki-kun?” Subaru cut across him, casting him a quizzical glance. “I’m sure I weigh a fair bit more than Suzuno does, just looking at her — what do you think you’re saying about us both, talking like that?”

Despite himself, Tokaki flushed red, and Suzuno grinned.

“Thank you, Subaru.” She said, amused as she met the older girl’s gaze. “I really am glad you decided to come with us. Tokaki has a big mouth — at least now there’s someone who can effectively shut him up.”

“Hey!” Tokaki protested, a wounded expression crossing his face. “You both know I didn’t mean it like that! Besides, Subaru’s weight is more… you know. Other things. And Suzuno, I wasn’t saying you were heavy, just…”

“That I might not be strong enough to bear any weight at all for any length of time, perhaps?” Tatara’s sober eyes glittered with amusement, and Tokaki let out a frustrated exclamation, throwing his hands up in the air.

“Fine! I give up! Yeesh. If even Tatara’s getting in on it now, I’ve got no chance. Kasaru, we’re the guys here, remember? You’re supposed to be on my side.”

“Am I?” Tatara feigned innocence. “I thought I was on Suzuno-sama’s side. Was I wrong?”

He held up his hand, his Byakko mark glistening in the sunlight, and Subaru chuckled.

“It seems Tatara’s smarter than you, Tokaki-kun.” She said playfully. “But so long as you’ve got the message, we’ll drop it now.”

“Toroki, are you really all right?” Suzuno cast their silent companion a concerned glance, noting her preoccupied expression and clouded green eyes. Toroki frowned, shrugging her shoulders.

“I guess we’ll see.” She said softly. “When we get to Arudo.”

“Are you going to sulk the whole way?” Tokaki demanded. “Look, it was my butt you saw getting kicked, and I’m not going to be killed so easily as you think. For Byakko’s sake, Toroki, lighten up just a little, will ya? We’re a long way from Arudo yet. All kinds of things might happen in the meantime. There’s no need to go round looking like a funeral right now.”

Toroki gazed at him thoughtfully for a moment, but made no attempt to respond, and Tokaki sighed.

“This is going to be one of those trips, ain’t it.” He said resignedly.

“The path ahead forks again when we get beyond the KaisuBridge.” Tatara turned his gaze back to the road ahead. “We need to keep on the same path, however. The turning will take us out of our way, even though it looks like it’s going in the right direction.”

“You really do remember this area, don’t you?” Tokaki looked impressed, and Tatara nodded.

“In fits and starts, yes.” He acknowledged. “My teacher and I used to walk this road sometimes, because I used to like coming to the bridge and watching the river swirl beneath it. It’s so close to the sea, you see — all kinds of birds and animals can be seen at different times of the year.”

“What used to be the Tsuonie estate is along the forked path, isn’t it?” Toroki asked quietly, and Tatara smiled.

“It is.” He agreed. “Though you needn’t look concerned. I’m quite all right with crossing this land again. My parents’ death was a long time ago. The famine and disease that hit this region then was severe and caused a lot of damage to all levels of society. But the land is healthier now, even despite the unrest coming from the capital. Contrary to my fears, Toroki, I think that the area looks quite well.”

“The people in this area are resilient, that’s why.” Subaru reflected. “At least, so I’ve found from living in Kaidou. When you deal with so many different types of people all crossing your path at once, you have to learn to be flexible and opportunistic.”

She cast Tatara a glance.

“You did tell me your name was Tsuonie, when you introduced yourself.” She added. “I hadn’t made the connection, though, between it and the family that used to own land here. The mausoleum isn’t far from Kaidou, if I remember rightly. Are you sure you don’t want to take the detour and see your kin? It might be a long time before you’re back here… you should probably take the chance.”

“You haven’t said goodbye to your mother either, have you?” Suzuno

realised, casting Subaru an anxious glance, and Subaru shook her head.

"No." She owned. "We didn't really have time."

"And we don't have time for my sentiments, either." Tatara said pragmatically. "We're headed for Arudo — that's all that we should focus on."

"Is that the bridge you mentioned, up ahead?" Suzuno asked, pointing towards a hefty wooden structure, logs lashed together with sturdy lengths of tarred rope and nailed at intervals by large, molded pins. "It looks huge — is that the place you used to come, as a child?"

"It's a busy route in and out of Kaidou and this part of Sairou as a whole." Tatara nodded. "It often sees a lot of traffic early in the morning and late in the evening, because of the market and the opportunity to trade with the merchants and visitors in the coastal port."

"More economics." Suzuno murmured. "But I guess I understand. If it wasn't so big, it wouldn't be able to take traders' carts, would it?"

"Exactly." Subaru nodded her head. "Though at this time they should already have passed through. It should be fine for us to walk across without fear of being mown down by a slow-moving merchant wagon."

"At least the sky is clear, too." Tokaki reflected. "There ain't much water where I come from, but I've heard that if you cross a river in a rainstorm, the water swells and makes it flow more quickly. Is this a river that floods, Tatara?"

"The bridge is built in case of that happening, but it rarely ever does." Tatara responded. "Once we reach the other side, we'll be on the path to Arudo and we'll be completely inland once again, though. This is about as much water as Sairou has, Suzuno-sama. When we get back inland, well, it'll be more of the desert I'm afraid."

"That's all right." Suzuno assured him. "I'm getting used to that."

She skipped forward onto the bridge, taking in the neat, concise way in which the construction had been built as she did so. It had obviously been standing for quite some time, with broad beams criss-crossing beneath it to bear the weight of many heavy vehicles at one time, and the wood beneath her feet bore grooves from where cart-wheels had thundered over day after day. At each side, thick lengths of wood provided a strong barrier that ran from one side of the other, and at intervals of two or three feet, solid blocks of what looked like elm wood held this barrier firm.

"It really is a strong bridge." She murmured. "I don't think even in my world they'd be able to build one that was steadier."

“What are bridges like in your world, Suzuno?” Subaru asked curiously. “You’re looking at this one like it’s something totally new.”

“I suppose it is.” Suzuno blushed, turning to meet her companion’s gaze. “They’re not like this, that’s for sure. For the most part, they’re made of metal, and…”

“Suzuno, look out!” Anything else she was about to say died in her throat as Toroki let out a yell, fear flaring in her green eyes as she darted across the bridge to grasp the young girl by the wrist. Suzuno started, staring at the prophet’s wild gaze in alarm, but in that next instant the sound of rapid hoofbeats echoed through the surrounding area, growing heavier and quicker with each passing second. As Toroki struggled to pull Suzuno back, a stab of fear shot through the Miko’s heart and she let out a yell, pulling away from her Seishi companion as she registered the fact that the horse was coming right towards them, and more, that the young man in the saddle was clearly completely lacking in control.

“Toroki, get out of the way!” Suzuno shrieked, shoving the redhead away from her with force and, as Toroki went sprawling across the planking, her young companion backed up against the barrier, heart in her throat as she realised that even pressed up against the wood rail she was still in danger from the frightened animal’s reckless hooves.

“Suzuno, stay still! Stay completely still!” Tokaki exclaimed, and Suzuno stared at him, confusion in her gaze.

“Still?” She echoed.

“Tokaki, teleport over there and grab her.” Toroki was dragging herself to her feet, fear in her eyes. “She’s right up against the barrier, and that young idiot can’t stop. I saw him coming… you’re the only one who can get to her in time.”

“No! Tokaki, I’m fine!” Suzuno shook her head. “I’ll press right up here and nothing will happen to me. The horse will be through in a second… I’ll be fine!”

She took another step back, but mis-judged her footing and her eyes opened wide with alarm as she found nothing but open space beneath her toes. She wobbled, grabbing for the railing, but it was slick and smooth from the spray of the river and as her grasp slid loose, she found herself falling through the gap between the sturdy wooden posts. She let out a blood-curdling scream, knowing that below her there was nothing but the racing salt-tinged waters of Sairou’s biggest river.

For a moment, everything seemed to go in slow motion, as even the air rushing by her face seemed to be holding her in mid-air, suspending her

over the cold wetness that lay below. Panic coursed through Suzuno's mind, blocking her vocal chords and preventing her from letting out another scream. In the eerie silence that followed, the young girl felt her life flash before her eyes, and her lips moved soundlessly as she found herself instinctively reciting as many prayers as she could remember ever having been taught.

"Suzuno-sama!"

"Suzuno!"

"Suzuno-chan!"

From somewhere above she heard voices, desperate and distant, then, as she hit the water, all other thoughts were knocked out of her head by the sudden shock of the freezing blue-green waves. Her mouth filled up with water, and she choked, struggling to the surface as she spat out the salt-filled liquid that only a short distance away had been pulled back in from the sea. This knowledge sent fresh panic through her body, as she realised that the force of the current was strong enough to wash her out into the ocean and into oblivion.

"Suzuno-sama!"

The voice came again, somehow seeming further away, then, with a tremendous splash, something landed in the water beside her. As the ice coldness of the water began to penetrate Suzuno's struggling limbs, someone swam towards her, slipping strong arms around her upper body and holding her tightly.

"Don't panic. I've got you." The words were soft-spoken, yet to Suzuno they seemed to echo through every one of her senses, and relief coursed through her veins, making her feel sick and giddy with relief.

"T… Tatara-san?"

"Hold on to me, if you can." Tatara's voice was unmistakeable now, and he grasped her arms, placing them carefully around his shoulders, his strong legs treading water firmly against the racing current. "Hold on, Suzuno-sama. I need my hands free to send out a vine… else we'll lose our way and be swept out to sea."

"I… I'll try." Suzuno swallowed hard, gripping her Seishi companion as best she could with the icy sensation numbing her fingers and making her clothing seem heavier by the minute. "It's s… s… so cold, Tatara-san… even though the s… sun is shining, it's s… s… so cold."

"The sea is always cold, here." Tatara told her, even as he fumbled for one of the seeds that hung around his neck. "Are you holding on tightly,

Suzuno-sama? This might wrench a little, but bear with it, all right? I don't want you in this water longer than you have to be."

He flung his hand up out of the water, the tiny black speck of the seed shooting up into the air in a spray of water droplets, and even as it rose it split and opened, sending thick green vines out in all directions. Suzuno felt Tatara's body tense as he took full control of the spell, and as one end of the vine wound itself tightly around the framework of the bridge, the other slipped beneath the blue-green ripples, winding itself firmly around both Suzuno and her rescuer.

Despite her predicament, Suzuno felt a flush of embarrassment rush through her as she realised how tightly pressed together she and her Seishi now were.

"We're going up." Was all Tatara said, however, and as he raised his hand again, Suzuno felt the vine twitch and then tug upwards, yanking them both out of the blue with a hefty jerk. As the cool breeze hit them, Suzuno's teeth began to chatter, and, as the vines deposited them both unceremoniously back on the bridge she sank to her knees, shaking too much to be able to stand.

"Suzuno!" Toroki hurried to the young girl's side, anxiety in her expression. "What were you doing, you silly girl? I was trying to get you out of the way — what kind of heroics were you trying to pull?!"

"I… I didn't w… want you t… t… trampled." Suzuno managed, glancing up at the older woman sheepishly. "You're n… needed too, remember? And I wou… would've been all right, but I… I st… st… stepped too f… f… far backwards and f… fell through the g… g… gap. You would've been t… t… totally run down if y… you hadn't m… moved."

"Are you all right?" Subaru crouched at her side. "You look a little blue, Suzuno-chan. The water's cold at this time of year, you know — not a good time to go swimming."

"I don't swim that well anyway." Suzuno admitted. "Is Tatara…?"

"I'm fine, Suzuno-sama." Tatara himself answered, getting to his feet and offering her a smile. "Forgive the impulsiveness of my actions — it was the only thing I could think of to do."

"Tokaki stopped the horse and rescued the boy riding it." Subaru added. "The kid was crying like anything because of it, but since Tatara'd gone after you, Tokaki seemed pretty sure you'd be all right. He's just taking the kid to Kaidou — he'll teleport himself back to us when he's done."

"Suzuno needs dry clothing, and so does Tatara." Toroki observed. "That was pretty brave, Tatara… jumping in like that."

“Not really.” Tatara shook his head, a faint flush touching his cheeks as he wrung out the water from his thick brown hair. “I’m a good swimmer. And I truly didn’t think about it at all. Suzuno-sama was in danger… that’s all. I just went.”

“I suppose that’s the kind of bond a Miko has with her Seishi, huh.” Subaru looked thoughtful. “I think it was pretty brave, Tatara-san. Whatever you say about it, you could’ve both been swept out to sea.”

“I don’t think so.” Tatara smiled. “But in any case, Suzuno-sama is safe and that’s all that’s important.”

“But in danger of catching cold, at this rate.” Toroki looked troubled. “If we go back to Kaidou now…”

“No, we don’t need to do that.” Subaru shook her head. “Let’s get off the bridge, so we’re out of people’s way. I think I have a solution for the wet clothing, but I’d rather we weren’t a public obstruction in the meantime.”

“Can you stand up, Suzuno-sama?” Tatara asked anxiously, holding out his hand to her, and Suzuno blushed, nodding her head.

“I think so. Thank you.” She agreed, allowing him to help her to her feet. “Tatara-san, you don’t need to call me Suzuno-sama. Especially now you’ve saved my life — I’ve been meaning to say so for a while, but now seems as good a time as any. I’m just Suzuno — it’s fine. You’re my rescuer, now. It seems wrong for you to call me that.”

“Really?” Tatara looked surprised. “But you are Byakko no Miko, so I thought…”

“It’s all right. Really.” Suzuno dimpled. “We’re friends. I’m not your mistress and you’re not my servant. Suzuno is fine. Really.”

“All right.” Tatara shrugged, a faint smile touching his lips. “I’ll try and remember. Suzuno.”

“And now that’s done, let’s get off the bridge.” Toroki suggested. “We’re starting to gather a crowd, and once Tokaki gets the kid into Kaidou, no doubt lots more people will want to know what happened here. It won’t be long before folk realise it was Byakko’s magic — Subaru, I really hope you do know a way to deal with the clothing situation.”

“I do.” Subaru assured her. “And that copse over there is a perfect place for us to stop and do so, don’t you think? It’s nice and sheltered, out of the wind.”

“You’re not g… going to m… make me t… t… take my c… clothes off in p… public, are you?”

Suzuno eyed Subaru doubtfully, shivering again as a cold wind blew right through her wet attire, and the older girl grinned, shaking her head.

"Nothing so spectacular, I promise." She assured her gently. "Both of you, just stand there, side by side. Don't move — and don't speak to me for a minute, all right? I want to concentrate for a moment — it's been a while since I've done this."

"Done what?" Suzuno looked startled, and Subaru winked.

"You'll see." She said softly, raising her hands as a faint whiteish haze flickered around her fingers. She smiled, stretching her finger-tips out towards her two drenched companions and as she did so, Suzuno felt an odd warmth creep up through her limbs, spreading bit by bit through every inch of her body. Subaru closed her eyes, concentration crossing her pretty features, then, with a nod, she lowered her hands, casting Suzuno a warm grin.

"Done." She said lightly. "You can move now."

"It's dry." Tatara murmured, touching his long hair with a startled expression on his face. "Even this. But how… Subaru-san, is this…?"

"My Byakko power?" Subaru shrugged. "Sort of. It's a bit hard to define it — but yes, that's what I used."

"So you can heat stuff up? Or dry stuff? Or…?" Suzuno faltered, and Toroki's eyes widened with realisation.

"The time weaver." She murmured, staring at Subaru with new eyes. "The time weaver… is you!"

"Time… weaver?" Suzuno frowned. "What does that mean, Toroki?"

"It seems a little grandiose for my messing around with things the way I do." Subaru said off-handedly. "But I suppose that is what it is."

She grasped Suzuno's fingers in hers.

"I didn't dry your outfit, or Tatara's." She continued playfully. "I just turned them back to how they were before you fell off the bridge. That's all."

"Turned them…?"

"One of Byakko's people is blessed with the power of time over objects." Toroki murmured. "I knew one was, but I didn't know which. But it is you, isn't it, Subaru? That's what you were doing. You were sending Tatara and Suzuno's clothing back to a previous state."

"Yes." Subaru agreed. "Like I said — it's difficult to define."

“So you… turn back time?” Tatara looked doubtful, and Subaru shook her head.

“Not time itself.” She replied. “I can’t go back to last week or last month and redo something that was done then. But if it’s an individual object, then I can turn time backwards or forwards on that. For example, Toroki, you scratched your hand when you fell, didn’t you?”

She reached out, grasping the fingers of Toroki’s un-gloved left hand in hers. “But now, if you look, it’s no longer scratched at all.”

“Amazing.” Tatara murmured. “So that is what Toroki meant by ‘time weaver’.”

“And that’s what you were talking about when you threatened to send Tokaki back to puberty.” Suzuno realised. Subaru chuckled.

“Between you and me, I’m not sure if I could do such a big spell on a person’s entire being.” She owned. “In theory, I know the power is there, but it’s complex and till now my magic has waxed and waned so I’ve only used it in small quantities. Just to fix damaged uniform and clean dirty steps — things like that. But Tokaki doesn’t need to know that… right?”

She winked.

“Suzuno-chan, I feel somehow stronger now I’ve met you.” She added. “So who knows? Maybe I would be able to do it now.”

“You fixed my hand just fine.” Toroki flexed and clenched her fist. “It wouldn’t surprise me at all if you could, Subaru.”

“Speaking of Tokaki, shouldn’t someone let him know where we are?” Tatara asked mildly. “Since he left you when you were on the bridge, and he won’t know where we’ve gone.”

“I’ll go find him.” Toroki volunteered. “You’re right, Tatara. Once we’re all together again, we can move on.”

“I don’t feel at all like I fell in a river today.” Suzuno realised, glancing at herself as the redhead slipped out of the copse to find their missing companion. “You know, Subaru, I think maybe you used magic on me as well as on my clothes. I feel like nothing even happened.”

“I also.” Tatara agreed. “It seems you’re stronger than you know, Subaru-san — even now.”

“Well, that bodes well for the journey ahead, I suppose.” Subaru shrugged. “Though it wasn’t impressive enough to save anyone’s life today. Your power is the strong one, Tatara-san. And you went in after Suzuno like a rocket — you’re tougher than you look.”

“The Miko was in danger and I sought to protect her.” Tatara reddened. “That’s all.”

“I don’t know.” Subaru’s eyes danced with mischief. “I think you make quite a cute couple, wrapped together in vine like that.”

“Subaru!” Suzuno flushed red, dismay and embarrassment glittering in her dark eyes, and Subaru laughed.

“Well, just saying.” She said casually. “You never know where these things might lead to.”

She shrugged her shoulders once more.

“The road ahead is going to be tough, isn’t it?” She added, the humour dying from her expression as she reflected on their mission. “But at least we’re somewhat prepared for what’s to come. And who knows? Maybe we’ll find even better ways to put what Byakko gave us to good use once we get to Arudo.”

Chapter 19

Chapter Eighteen

There was a faint breeze in the air as Chichiri made his way between the rows of tiny green shoots, glancing at them absently as he walked towards the edges of the Ri farmland. Above his head, he could hear the faint wing-beats and shrill cries of the mountain birds as they courted for a mate, and a faint smile touched his lips. Spring was definitely in the air now, he knew. Before long the small green specks in the dirt would become thriving, healthy plants, and as the days grew longer, so would the sound of childrens' laughter penetrate the village atmosphere earlier and earlier in the day.

His own two were no exception to this rule, either, he reflected, his gaze falling on the tiny, elfin form of his young daughter as she daintily skipped between the beds, plucking out weeds and humming a tune under her breath. Even at almost ten years old, Meikyo was still much smaller than many of her fellows, yet Chichiri knew that inside her chest beat a heart of gold, and he inwardly sent a prayer of thanks to Suzaku for having preserved the fragile baby, allowing her to become a thriving, healthy child.

Eiju was on the mountain again, he knew, training with Maichu in the ways of a swordsman. Soon he would probably be ready to leave for the capital, and then Chichiri realised that his son would no longer be a child under his protective wing but a man out in the world to fend for himself.

"They grow up far too fast, you know." He reflected softly. "In a year or so, Hikari might be married. Eiju might be in armour. And I'll have to resign myself to the approach of old age."

He chuckled at this thought, knowing that despite being in his middle forties, he was almost as healthy and fit as he had been twenty years ago when he and his Suzaku brethren had first gathered together to summon the Phoenix.

This thought reminded him of his purpose, and he slipped his hand into the folds of his cloak, pulling out the small black object and glancing at it thoughtfully.

Though he did not know how it worked, he knew that it was technology from Hikari's world which the girl had once used to tell

the time. Hikari had called it a ‘watch’ and, though the battery had long since given out, for Chichiri it had another function. In the past, he had used it successfully to bridge the gap between his world and the one beyond. And now, with everyone else busy and Hikari away from the village, he knew it was time to try again.

“If my suspicions are correct, something’s happening there as well as here.” he muttered, pushing back the gate and heading nimbly up the path that led to the stream. A year ago, he knew, the peace of this retreat had been shattered by a sword battle to the death, and as he approached the swiftly running water, he spared a thought for the young soldier who had breathed his last on its banks.

“Hei Kayu, rest in peace.” He murmured, bringing his fingers together in an automatic blessing. “Though I don’t believe your spirit walks here anymore — if it ever did. Still, blood was spilled here — for that reason, I can’t give Suzaku’s blessing enough times.”

He spread his *kesa* out on the ground, settling himself on it as he turned the watch over thoughtfully in his hand. Since the day he had brought Hikari back to the ShijinTenchishou, he had not tried to make contact with his friends on the other side, unsure as to what such a connection would mean. Hikari’s permanent move between the worlds had affected both sides of the equation in more ways than one, and even now he hesitated to try and open the divide once more.

“When Hikari came here, there was a shift in time and space.” He mused inwardly. “I felt it, though she may not have known what it was. Hikari was born in that world. It let her go, but it didn’t happen without an aftershock. Hisei’s magic stabilised it, and both of us as we crossed over. But it might be dangerous to try and contact people on that side. If I’m right about this change, it might break down the barriers that prevent people from easily crossing from one to the other and that would be a disaster. But then again, considering the portents…”

He frowned, debating it out with himself for a moment. Then he sighed, bringing his hands together around the watch as he made up his mind.

“Some risks have to be taken.” He reflected. “And I’ll just have to hope I don’t live to regret this one.”

He closed his good eye, channeling his Suzaku energy into the small black object as he carefully probed around it for the link that connected it to the other world. At first he could find no trace, but then, little by little he touched upon the flickering, densely packed

aura of Hikari's world, and he pursed his lips, moulding his life force to slip through the tiny cracks and into the space beyond.

As he did so, he felt the vibrating sensation of familiar chi, and he let out a heavy sigh of relief.

He had done it, then. He had made it through.

"But like I thought, it was easier than it should've been." He admitted, as he composed himself to send his message.

"Tamahome-kun! Tamahome-kun, can you hear me?"

There was no immediate reply, and Chichiri frowned, re-focusing his thoughts.

"Tamahome-kun, I know you're there. I can feel your chi. It's Chichiri — I can't hold this link forever, so if you can hear me, say something."

"*Chichiri*?" A voice crackled over the connection, and relief coursed Chichiri's body as he realised he had made contact.

"I knew you were about." He said amiably. "I'm sorry. It's been a while since we spoke, and I'm unforgivably late in contacting you. It's not because I've been deliberately ignoring you, just I wasn't sure it was stable enough to do so till now… it's not easy opening up communications between this world and that one."

"It's only because I was walking past Hikari's room that I heard you." came the wavering response. "You're lucky that we still have a lot of her things out on display. I don't know how you cast the spell, Chichiri, but it always seems to go through her alarm clock. If we'd packed that up…"

"Never mind." Chichiri cut across him. "I don't know how long the connection will last just on my magic alone. It's easier than it was the last time, but that doesn't mean that I can hold it indefinitely."

"I'm sorry." Taka's voice sounded contrite. "Are you calling about Hikari? Is that what this is? Something hasn't happened to her… has it?"

"No, your daughter is quite well, Taka-kun." Chichiri assured him. "She's growing into a fine young woman, just as I'm sure you'd expect. I'm very proud of how she's turning out, if you want to know the truth — she's a credit to her family."

"That's good to know." Taka sounded relieved. "Is… she around?"

"At the moment she's with some friends, so she's not here." Chichiri

said apologetically. “I wanted to speak to you alone. To be truthful, I didn’t really call about Hikari. Though I’m happy to give you good news of her, it’s about something else.”

There was a moment of silence, then,

“Arina, then.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“This is about Arina, isn’t it?”

“Arina…?” Chichiri’s brow furrowed. “I’m not sure I understand. What or who is Arina?”

“She’s not with you?” Now Taka sounded anxious. “But I was sure…”

“Tousan, who are you talking to?”

A fresh voice interrupted the conversation at that moment, and Chichiri recognised the tones as that of Taka and Miaka’s son, Makoto.

“Makoto-kun, is that you?”

“Shi-i-it, the *alarm clock* is talking now?!” Makoto’s exclamation brought a smile to the sorcerer’s face, a smile which widened as he heard his old friend’s response.

“I don’t care if elephants are dancing on Hikari’s bed, Makkun, you don’t use that language in this house.”

“In *this* house, that could happen.” Makoto muttered. “What’s going on? Is this something to do with Oneesan? Or… Arina-san? Who are you even talking to?”

“Chichiri.” Chichiri heard Taka explain. “The man who…”

“Who took Hikari back to *that* place. I know.” Makoto’s tones were flat. “So? What about it? Does he have Arina-san too? Is that what it’s about?”

“I think I’m missing an important part of this conversation.” Chichiri said gravely. “Arina is the name of Hikari’s friend, isn’t it? I remember now — her friend from your world?”

“Yes… only she’s not in this world any more.” Taka sighed. “Chichiri, a few days ago Arina went to the place that Byakko no Miko was buried. And she disappeared there, in a flash of white light. Since then noone’s seen anything of her. It’s been a huge media story, because students caught it on film and noone can explain it. But we’re sure it means…”

“She somehow came into this world.” Chichiri’s heart skipped a beat. “Then my hunch is looking more and more like reality.”

“Hunch?”

“Well, let’s just say that things have been spiritually active in Byakko’s quarter of late.” Chichiri said simply. “Aside from the existing Byakko warrior Toroki, who’s currently in Kutou, I’m fairly sure I sensed the chi of another Western Seishi in Eiyou recently. Byakko’s stars seem brighter than they usually are, too. And now you say that this Arina child disappeared at the grave of Byakko’s Miko…?”

“That all sounds pretty messed up to me, Chichiri or whatever your name is.” Makoto said frankly. “But I know Arina-san did disappear and I’m sure she wound up in your freakass world, because there’s no other explanation. Besides, Uncle Keisuke and I’ve been discussing it, and we both think there’s a good chance that Arina-san *is* that Suzuno woman. Only reincarnated or something.”

“Makkun, why didn’t you tell me that sooner?” Taka’s voice was full of shock, and Makoto snorted.

“*You’ve* been working, and you nag me about my homework whenever I want to discuss this kind of thing, like you don’t really want me involved at all.” He returned neatly. “Keisuke-jisan doesn’t. He listens to me, and he’s cool with me being involved. Besides, he thinks that too. That Arina-san and that Suzuno person are the same. Just like you were Tama… whatever it is, and now you’re Sukunami Taka.”

“Reincarnated?” Chichiri’s mind whirled for a moment, then he got to grips with himself, nodding his head. “That actually makes a lot of sense, Makoto-kun. But it also means a lot of trouble — especially since, if Arina has been pulled into this world, she’s probably nowhere near where I am. She’s most likely in Sairou… which is a long way from the Eastern Village, even through the mountain pass.”

He sighed.

“Her family must be worried.” he said regretfully. “But… did you say it happened a few days ago?”

“Yes.” Taka confirmed. “It was on the news, and Makkun downloaded the segment.”

“I don’t fully understand what you mean.” Chichiri admitted. “But I’m guessing it’s fairly set in stone, you know?”

“Hikari-neesan went to your world and didn’t come back.” Makoto said quietly. “So Arina-san might not come back either, might she?”

“I don’t know.” Chichiri said heavily. “I contacted your father to discover whether or not something had happened in your world. I didn’t imagine it would be quite of this level, though. That Byakko’s people were gathering, well, that struck me as strange. Especially since one of them is clearly dead. Still, if Byakko’s Seishi are awakening, they probably need a Miko through which to summon the God. Arina may or may not have a direct connection to Suzuno — I don’t know for sure. But from what you said, Makoto-kun, it seems likely.”

“The book said that Amefuri snuffed it.” Makoto said acerbically. “And Uncle Keisuke said that if one of the Seishi was dead, and that if Arina-san was this Byakko no Miko person, she’d need to find my sister if she was going to raise the God. Is that true?”

“Makkun, what are you…” Taka’s voice became filled with horror, and Chichiri sighed.

“Yes.” He admitted reluctantly. “I had thought about that myself, to be honest. If Byakko’s legend did begin again, Amefuri is dead. That’s beyond a doubt, and his remains were cremated. Myoume took his ashes back to his home village and scattered them there. Without Amefuri, Byakko’s Seishi can’t summon the God alone. They would need a Shinzahou — like Hikari.”

“This is why you’re really calling us.” Taka said softly. “To see if you could find a way to trace the prospective Miko before she crossed over, in order to put her in touch with Hikari before it got to being troublesome?”

“Nothing of the sort.” Chichiri said helplessly. “I felt there might be a Miko, I didn’t know it was a foregone conclusion and I had no idea Arina had even arrived here. Hikari has left for Kutou to go and see Myoume and her imminent new arrival, and I took that gamble because I thought that if Byakko was on the move, Myoume would be one to know about it. And I did think Hikari might help, if it came to the crunch. She’s got much better with her magic, now. But that it might be her own hometown best friend… I didn’t see that coming at all.”

He paused, then,

“Taka-kun, how long has it been since I took Hikari away from you and Miaka?” He asked quietly.

“How long?” Taka sounded surprised. “A year and a half. Why?”

“A year and a half.” Chichiri echoed. “I see.”

“Are you going to tell me that Hikari’s aged by about ten years since I last saw her?” Taka demanded, and Chichiri frowned.

“No.” He said evenly. “She’s seventeen. Exactly a year and a half older than she was when you let her go.”

“But…” Taka faltered, and Chichiri sighed.

“I was afraid of this.” He murmured. “Taka, when Hikari was accepted by the ShijinTenchishou she was rejected by your world. But even though she now lives in this world, she still has ties in your world. Family. Memories. Remember? Memories are important. *You* already have residual memories that you shouldn’t have — memories of being Sou Kishuku. Now Hikari has recollections of her life here and her life there. Your world and mine have become ever more bound together. Time is now moving at the same speed. And, although Hikari originally crossed time to come here, I didn’t have to extend my magic across the same stretch of time to reach you this time. Because of that, I think, it’s no longer a matter of that book being the only gateway to this world. Somehow, Byakko’s taken advantage of that fact. Arina may well be Oosugi Suzuno reincarnated. The possibilities are high, considering the event. But that he could reach her so easily has to be because of this alignment — that now there are other ways to reach into the Miko’s world and summon a maiden without having to have the original spell text in front of you.”

“So you mean that, give it a little while and you’ll be able to run holiday camps to this world of yours?” Makoto demanded, and Chichiri pursed his lips.

“I don’t know what it might mean.” He admitted. “Or if it’s a good thing or a bad one. For the time being, I want to let it alone. If time is moving at the same speed, then that’s probably not a big issue in itself. As Hikari becomes stronger, I suppose, things will become more stable. And if she can help Byakko, it shouldn’t have any impact on your world at all. I just…”

“Just *what*, Chichiri?”

“I wonder what exactly Byakko is calling Arina to save Sairou from.” Chichiri admitted. “There’s something in the air that I can’t quantify at all. And it’s bothering me. A lot.”

He sighed.

“I’ll do my best to find out what happened to Arina, and if I can, I’ll do my best to ensure she completes her quest and gets home safely.” He added. “I can’t leave Kounan for long, but I’ll see what I can discover. Now I know a name, at least, it will help me to know what I’m looking for.”

“Chichiri, please, protect Hikari, too.” Taka begged, and Chichiri smiled.

“That goes without saying, you know.” He agreed. “I’m very fond of your daughter, Taka-kun. Not just because she’s my Shinzahou, but because of who she is. She’s done a lot of good since she’s been here. Her safety is paramount to me too — you can rest assured that I won’t let anything hurt her.”

He frowned.

“I can’t hold the spell any longer.” He added. “And probably shouldn’t try to, if the connection between our worlds is becoming so frail. I’ll be in touch again when it’s safe for me to do so, if I discover anything about Arina. In the meantime, try and leave that side of it to me. If I can send her back, I will.”

Before his friend could respond, the magic surrounding the watch sputtered out, and Chichiri dropped back on the grass, taking a deep breath into his lungs as he stared up at the sky.

“Byakko no Miko, huh.” He murmured. “Well. Things are moving at startling speed… faster than even I realised. I only hope that I haven’t sent Hikari into danger. Sairou have been at peace for a long time, but appearances can be deceptive. And I get the feeling that even if the enemy is already active, Byakko’s own people are far from ready to fight in the way they’re going to have to fight from hereon in.”

“Is it a long ride to Arudo, Zarin-dono?”

As the two horses left the village, Haruka gripped more tightly onto the reins of Anara’s horse, casting the soldier a wide-eyed, curious glance as they approached Shouki-mura’s wooded boundary. The settlement was still quiet, for it was barely after dawn in Sairou, yet the few villagers who were around stopped to stare at them, murmuring among themselves as they wondered what a man in Imperial military uniform, an apothecary’s wife and a young stray rescued from the mountains could be doing riding North together at that time in the morning.

True to his word, Zarin had returned to Shouki a bare half hour

earlier to find that his young charge and her self-appointed guardian were ready to leave and had been prepared since before sunrise for the trip to the capital. For both of them, he knew, it would be a first visit, and inwardly Zarin felt a flash of sympathy for the young child whose life so far had already been so full of change.

“It’ll be a heavy ride.” He said now, nudging his faithful beast into a more steady canter as they broke into the desert proper. “Hang on tightly, Haruka. If you’ve not ridden a horse before, you’ll find it a touch bumpy, so make sure you keep your grip. Anara-san will no doubt be able to guide the animal, so just make sure you don’t fall off.”

“I’ve never needed to ride a horse before.” Haruka said unnecessarily. “My Pa never had one — never could afford one.”

“Are you scared?” Anara asked softly from her position directly behind the youngster in the saddle, and Haruka shook her head.

“No.” She said frankly. “Horses are only animals. They’re not wolves or anything, neither. They’re not goin’ to eat me an’ if I’m on top of it, it can’t trample me. So it’s fine. I just don’t know how to steer it — an’ it ain’t real comfortable sittin’ up here like this.”

“It can be uncomfortable if you’re not used to it.” Zarin agreed. “But try and bear with it. It’s a lot faster than trying to walk to Arudo.”

“It seems messed up that I’m really goin’ to the palace.” Haruka’s young features twitched into a rueful expression. “Me an’ some friends used to joke about bein’ like the Emperor, goin’ where we wanted an’ stuff like that. We even joked about goin’ to the palace. Now I’m really goin’ to do it — it’s too weird, it won’t sink in.”

“Well, I hope you won’t be disappointed then.” Zarin said matter-of-factly. “Sairou’s royal palace is very beautiful. And I sent a messenger from Eiroku yesterday to notify Sashi-hime to expect our coming. I’m sure that they’ll be eager to welcome you — they’ll want to hear your story for themselves.”

“Sashi-hime’s the Prince’s woman, isn’t she?” Haruka asked, and Zarin saw Anara wince at the young girl’s innocent bluntness. He nodded.

“In a manner of speaking.” He replied, amused. “But I wouldn’t refer to her like that to her face. The court are very particular about good manners — Sashi-hime is Princess Consort and the wife of the heir to Sairou’s throne. I think if you called her Nefuru-sama’s woman

you might find yourself with a few aggrieved guardsmen on your hands."

"Well, you know what I mean." Haruka flushed. "I don't really know all the posh language. I'll try and remember, though — at this rate I ain't goin' to be able to even speak to this lady, otherwise."

"Sashi-hime is a kind person, so I'm sure she'll understand." Zarin assured her. "She's specifically sought your company."

"So she has." Haruka pursed her lips. "I s'pose it's all right then. Jus' Geiyo-san told me not to swear if I could help it, an' I told him I'd do my best. But I don't know all the fancy words that you're s'posed to use for a Princess or somethin' like that. An' I don't want t'be rude to her — I know you shouldn't piss off powerful people if you can help it."

"That sounds like a wise survival skill to me." Anara said lightly, and Haruka nodded her head.

"If you annoy one town official, they're jus' one overweight guy who can't move as fast as you can." She said reflectively. "But if you tick off someone with a title, they have a whole army they can send out t'cut you to ribbons. People like Zarin-dono, and stuff. Right?"

"I don't think many of my comrades would want to cut a young girl to ribbons, Haruka." Zarin assured her. "But in theory, your logic is sound."

"Then maybe I'll just shut up an' speak when I'm spoken to." Haruka said seriously. "I don't know if I can do anything to help Sairou anyhow. But if I can, I want to try. So I'll do my best t'be good when I meet the Princess."

"I think she'll want to hear a little bit more about what happened to you in the mountains." Zarin said softly, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Haruka tense, a clouded look entering her vivid gaze.

"Do you really think so?" She asked hesitantly, and Zarin nodded.

"If there was something there, don't you think that the Royal Family should know about it?" He pointed out reasonably. "It threatened your life, didn't it? And killed two of your friends…?"

"Yes." Haruka said sadly. "But…"

"It's not a nice thing for her to remember, Zarin-kun." Anara said frankly. "It frightened her a good deal, so I hope your people will go gently on her. She's just young still."

“Whatever it was was looking for me.” Haruka said quietly. “It knew more about me than I did, and it wanted to kill me. Because it didn’t, that means it probably still wants to have another try. So if telling them at the palace is goin’ to do somethin’ to stop it, then I’ll talk about it. For Hami and the chibi’s sake, I’ll do it.”

“Good kid.” Zarin offered her a smile. “You remember the situation clearly, then?”

“As clearly as I probably ever will, I guess.”

“And whatever it was that attacked you was the thing that left the revenge message on the wall of the cave?”

“I don’t know but I guess so.” Haruka shrugged. “I can’t read, so I don’t know exactly what it said.”

“Fukushuu.” Anara murmured. “Revenge.”

“Just that?” Zarin asked, and Anara nodded.

“Just that.” She agreed grimly. “Two characters burned into the cave wall.”

“And you don’t know what might have caused it, Haruka?” Zarin cast a glance across at the youngster, who shook her head.

“No, except that whatever it was possessed my friend an’ used her to attack me. Whatever it was knew me. That’s all. Even though I didn’t know it. I think maybe it was because of who I used t’be, not who I am now — so that’s why I don’t remember.”

“Who you… used to be?”

“Subaru.” Haruka said simply. “That’s what Anara-san said my mark was. Subaru. So that means I was her before, right? When she came to Sairou and stuff with the other S… S… Star people.”

“Seishi.” Anara said softly, and Haruka nodded.

“Yeah. That.”

Zarin pursed his lips, considering this carefully.

“Make sure you tell all of this to Sashi-hime.” He said at length. “I don’t know what to make of it, or how the stellar legends work. I don’t even know more than the bare outlines of the original story, or whether or not anything you’ve said means anything at all. But she will, I’m sure of it. So make sure you tell her. All right?”

“All right.”

Haruka adjusted her grip on the reins, eying Zarin curiously.

“Zarin-dono, do you have a wife, back in Arudo?”

“A wife?” Zarin started, looking at the youngster in surprise. “No, I don’t. Why?”

“Just curious.” Haruka grinned. “Seems you like Sashi-hime plenty, is all. I wondered how much.”

“Haruka!” Anara’s eyes widened, and Zarin stared at his cheeky young companion, unable to believe his ears.

“Zarin-kun, I’m sorry.” Anara hastened to apologise. “Haruka, you can’t say things like that! Zarin’s a lot older than you, and what you’re suggesting…”

“I only asked.” Haruka said defiantly. “It wasn’t like I was being rude or anything. I only asked if he had a wife… it’s fine if he doesn’t.”

“Don’t you understand what you implied, asking a question like that?”

“Is there something wrong with it?” Haruka looked genuinely surprised. “I only wondered if he liked Sashi-hime so much because…”

“All right, enough already!” Anara clapped a hand over the youngster’s mouth, and despite himself, Zarin let out a rueful chuckle.

“You really shouldn’t ask Sashi-hime questions like that, either.” He warned her. “I’m not offended, but I’m sure a woman of her sensibilities would be, if you made those kinds of suggestions in her presence. I’m Sashi-hime’s Captain, Haruka. I’d give my life in her service if she asked it of me, and yes, in that sense, I suppose I am devoted to her. But it’s not the kind of affection you’re suggesting. There are a lot of ways a man can view a woman. He can respect her, serve her, devote himself to her… but it doesn’t mean it’s that kind of love. You’re young still, so you haven’t learnt the difference yet. But one day you’ll meet someone and then you will.”

“Maybe.” Haruka pushed Anara’s fingers aside, looking mildly disappointed. “So you’re not in love with her, then?”

“No, I’m not. Not in the way you mean.”

“But you’d still die for her and shit?”

“Of course. I’m sworn to do that, it’s part of what wearing this badge means.”

“It seems silly to me.” Haruka said matter-of-factly. “It’s a waste, isn’t it? To throw your life away because someone ordered you to, not because you care about them.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t care for Sashi-hime or her safety.” Zarin’s eyes twinkled with humour at the youngster’s bluntness. “But it’s respect and loyalty that drives me, not anything else.”

“Respect and loyalty.” Haruka murmured softly, then she twisted around in the saddle, meeting Anara’s gaze.

“Anara-san, which kind of person am I supposed to be?”

“Pardon me?”

“If I’m Subaru — which kind of way am I supposed to love Byakko? Because I thought I was doing this to avenge Hami and the chibi — and protect you an’ Geiyo-san because you’ve been kind to me. But I don’t really feel anything about Byakko as such. Does that make me bad somehow? I don’t love him.”

“No, it doesn’t make you bad.” Anara assured her. “You’ve just not had time to realise all the parts of what he’s asked of you yet, that’s all.”

She smiled.

“Maybe you’ll be called to fight out of loyalty and respect for Byakko, in time.” She added. “But when you have to do that, no doubt you’ll know and understand a lot more than you do now. You’re going to Arudo to talk to Princess Sashi, that’s all. You’re under Zarin’s protection — you won’t have to fight any battles until you’re ready to do so.”

Haruka was silent for a moment, and Zarin saw her eyes cloud over once more. Slowly she shook her head.

“So long as that dark thing is out there, I won’t be safe.” She said softly. “And I’ll have to fight it again.”

“You don’t know that, Haru-chan.” Anara reminded her, and Haruka sighed.

“Yes. I do.” She said seriously, glancing briefly down at her body then back towards the road ahead. “I can feel it, Anara-san. Somehow, I know I’m going to have to fight it again. And somehow… somehow I’ll have to *win*.”

“You seem troubled this morning, Myoume.”

Myoume turned from the window -seat of her chamber, wrapping her robe more tightly around her body as she met the quizzical amethyst gaze of her companion.

At just past thirty, there was still something fairy-like in Lirayi's delicate appearance, and even robed in the casual clothing of Kutou's court, there was no altering the fact that in many ways Hyoushin's younger sister was still far more Meihi than her brother. Her thick silver hair was braided neatly and perfectly as always in a classically Meihi style, and though she still bore the scars of her time in slavery, there was a gentleness that radiated from her — a gentleness which, since they day they had met, had put Myoume at ease. Lirayi's vision in one eye had been severely weakened, clouding her beautiful amethyst gaze, yet she was not unattractive, and though she still kept her distance from the male members of Shunhou's imperial society, she had always been open and welcoming to her brother's choice of wife. They could not look more different, Myoume pondered absently, yet she knew that, in the past eighteen months, Lirayi had become one of her closest allies.

As Myoume held out her hands to her companion, Lirayi smiled, crossing the room with her distinctively uneven gait, and pausing a foot or so away from the younger woman as she eyed her sister-in-law carefully.

"And you seem tired." She added softly, in her distinctive, Meihi accented voice. "You should be getting rest, you know — at this time it is even more important than before."

"I know." Myoume admitted. "I didn't sleep very well last night, Rayi… I think that my body's preparing itself for the events ahead, but I feel on edge."

"It is your first child." Lirayi said wisely, sinking down on the seat beside her and casting her a warm grin. "What woman would not be nervous?"

"I know." Myoume rested a hand absently on her stomach, then sighed. "I suppose that's the most of it. And when Hyoushin is away, I'm also ill at ease. I worry something will happen in his absence, and I don't want him to be away from Shunhou when I give birth. Even if I can't see any nurses letting him close to me when it happens, I still want to know he's within my reach."

"Oniichan has not travelled far this time." Lirayi reflected. "And I promised him to take care of you in his absence. He will be back within the hour, I imagine… it was a simple errand."

“And an important one, since it was regarding the land that used to be your village.” Myoume’s gaze softened. “I know that Kintsusei-sama wants his input on the future of that region. Besides, more Meihi seem to want to return to Kutou now they know that one of their people is the new Shougun. For Hyoushin to be involved in those things also seems logical, since he speaks both languages. I’m sorry, Rayi. I’m selfish, I know. But sometimes I can’t help being selfish. I don’t like it when he’s not here — not at the moment.”

“No, I either.” Lirayi looked pensive. “I have had too many years without him, so always when he leaves here I am worried. But he is Lilaihi-niichan and he will always come back. I believe this, and so must you. He will not stray from you when you need him most… if anything, I know this of my brother most of all.”

She slipped a delicate hand into Myoume’s own, squeezing it.

“I will be with you, no matter what.” She murmured. “To bless the child properly, a Meihi kinswoman must be there.”

Myoume grinned at her companion, nodding her head.

“I want my baby to understand both sides of his or her heritage properly.” She agreed, patting her stomach as she felt the kick of the infant that stirred inside of her. “I want it to speak both languages and be aware of both cultures. It’s an important thing for it to be able to choose what it wants to believe in and follow for itself. Besides, I love the sound of your language, even though I find it difficult to pronounce. With any luck, if the child hears it from the start, it won’t have the same problems.”

“You have learnt more Meihi than most people not from the tribe ever will.” Lirayi said comfortably. “And I find Chinese easy now I am in Kutou, so I am happy to speak it with you. You and Lila-nii are my family. I am excited, too, to be an aunt. It means my family will continue, even though most of them are no longer here.”

“I’m glad you’ll be here with me, Rayi.” Myoume said sincerely. “Aishi-sensei has no complaints about it, since you’ve helped deliver babies in the village in Hokkan. And I’d feel happier… having you there.”

“It makes me happy to do that for you.” Lirayi agreed. “There is nothing happier to me than a new birth.”

“No… I suppose not.” Myoume pursed her lips. “I can’t help thinking there’s something symbolic about this one. A baby born from Western genes and Meihi ones… a child of mixed blood. For Kutou,

that's a big thing. It's a step towards the future, since I want my child to grow up here. Little by little, Kutou is changing. The fears are subsiding, and people are becoming more open with one another. I'd like to think that my baby won't be the last child of mixed blood to grow up in this land."

"The Meihi too should begin to feel that way." Lirayi reflected. "Many Meihi still fear outside… but the children who do not remember do not fear so much as the adults do. If the adults don't give fear to the children, the children will reach out and mix. People can learn from each other. This is what I think. I was frightened to come back to Kutou, but because Lila-nii believed in it, I came. And I am happy I came. Now I can see my brother and my sister and their new baby and be a part of a family again. And in my own land… I am glad to be in Kutou, now."

"I'm sure that, if Meihi do come back East in numbers, the Emperor will want your help too." Myoume mused. "For now, though, he's focused on this princess that's coming from my homeland to be his bride… everything at court seems to be taken up with that at the moment."

"Yes. I have heard this talk too." Lirayi agreed. "Do you know this princess, Myoume?"

"Only by name." Myoume shook her head. "No more than that. But if I can help her feel at home, I will. Sairou and Kutou are very different places, so maybe I can."

"Perhaps I too." Lirayi pursed her lips. "There is not fear in Sairou, is there, for people born of Meihi tribe?"

"Of course not, though the Meihi aren't exactly common there." Myoume shook her head. "Most of Sairou's people come from one tribal clan or other, anyhow. Even the noble families, once upon a time. You shouldn't worry about that, Rayi. People in Sairou tend to just accept people of other appearances because it's such a common occurance to see different coloured hair or eyes. Perhaps there are remote tribal settlements which remain untouched — I don't know. But certainly where I come from, well, there were differences of opinion between people but not between races."

She smiled.

"I suspect Ouba-hime will be glad of any friendly faces, when she first arrives." She added. "And you and I both understand what it means to leave the family home and move far away to a place where culture and custom is different. Don't we?"

“Yes.” Lirayi agreed, smoothing her skirts over her knees with a pensive smile. “But you may be too busy, Myoume, to worry about an arriving Hime-sama. The child will come whether you are ready for it or not. And it will choose its own time, you know.”

“I know.” Myoume laughed. “Babies do their own thing, I’ve heard that already. But it’s all right. I’m looking forward to that bit. I don’t think I’m at all scared, in fact, of bringing it into the world or what will come after. I’d just like to know that Hyoushin won’t be on some errand or other when it does happen, that’s all. It’d be awful if messengers had to be sent to find him.”

“I trust that won’t be necessary, since I have no overriding plans to leave Shunhou in the next few weeks.”

A fresh voice from the doorway startled the two women and Myoume glanced up, letting out an exclamation as she saw her husband watching them. She got to her feet, and Hyoushin smiled, striding across the room towards her.

“Sit, Myoume. You are better off your feet.” He said softly. “Besides, you look tired. Don’t tell me that the one night I am away from your side you pine for company that much?”

“I suppose.” Myoume looked embarrassed, sinking back down obediently onto the window-seat. “I really didn’t get a good night’s sleep at all. Dreams… restless dreams… dreams which I don’t even remember except in fragments. I’m used to you being there, now. It’s pathetic, but I suppose I missed you.”

“A woman is always more sensitive and emotional when she is close to bringing a new life into the world.” Lirayi said sensibly. “Niichan should know better than to leave you overnight, even for the Emperor’s work.”

At this juncture she cast Hyoushin a pointed look, and Hyoushin sighed, shaking his head.

“I understand, Rayi, but I have duties to Kutou’s crown as well.” He said ruefully. “I do not want to be away from Myoume at present, either. But there are still things I must do. Especially with the Princess Ouba arriving in Sairou in the next week or two… there are many preparations and though the Emperor is understanding, there are things I need to handle myself. Better one night here and there where I am still in easy reach of the palace than to be deployed to the border to meet Aoiketsu and his companions.”

“Aoi is coming too?” Myoume brightened at this, raising

questioning seiran eyes to her husband's violet ones. "I didn't know that."

"The Emperor and I thought that it was wise." Hyoushin agreed. "I cannot go and meet them, and since Aoiketsu is such a prominent figure in Kintsusei-sama's design these days, it was seen as being the best answer. He is known to Reizeitei-sama and trusted by him, and it seems the Princess had a safe and secure stay in Kounan's capital. Therefore Aoiketsu received orders to accompany the party here, and I can rest easy knowing that even if I am not at the border myself, those who are will ensure her safe passage here."

"I see." Myoume pursed her lips. "Well, I'm glad. I haven't seen Aoi in more than a year, and I'd like to. I hope he'll be able to stay a day or two — I want to ask him lots of questions about Hikari and the South and the people there."

"That all depends on you, and on the baby." Hyoushin said frankly. "If it times its arrival badly, then there'll be no helping it."

"I know." Myoume sighed. "But if I can, I still want to."

"There is something else concerning you, my brother… I can see it in your eyes." Lirayi said softly, getting to her feet and taking Hyoushin's scarred hands carefully in hers. "What troubles you, Oniichan? You may as well share it with your womenfolk, since three minds are far better than just one."

"Troubles?" Myoume started, eying her husband as though for the first time and, as she took in the faint preoccupation in his amethyst gaze she bit her lip, anxiety clouding her own.

"Hyoushin, Rayi's right. Something is bothering you — what's up?"

"It's not something that need concern either one of you." Hyoushin shook his head. "It's not a bad thing, Rayi — you shouldn't be so quick to read into my every expression. I'm just tired, that's all, and in need of rest… I didn't sleep last night either, with working so late and wanting to leave for the palace at the crack of dawn."

"But something has happened." Myoume murmured. "Even if it doesn't concern us, Hyoushin, now that we know it's there, please tell us. I'll worry about it otherwise — knowing there's something on your mind."

"Trapped between the pair of you I know I can't win." Despite himself a rueful smile touched Hyoushin's features. "Bali forbid this new baby be a girl, because I don't think I can withstand a three-pronged attack of this nature."

Lirayi laughed.

“What do you think of us?” She scolded. “Niichan!”

“Only what I always have — that the both of you are far smarter of wits than I will ever be.” Hyoushin said regretfully. “As for what concerns me, it truly isn’t anything of any great significance. At least, I trust it is not. I have had word from Bakaru in the North — that is all.”

“Bakaru?” Lirayi’s eyes widened in surprise, then, “Is all well in the village? Niichan…”

“All is well.” Hyoushin nodded. “He wrote to me simply to say that the village has recently acquired a new resident — and he hopes that I, being so placed, will be able to assist him in dealing with it.”

“A new resident?” Myoume looked confused. “What kind of new resident?”

“A young girl. An outsider.” Hyoushin paused for a moment, then, “A girl with jet black hair and dark eyes… just like Sukunami Hikari.”

“Just like…” Myoume swallowed hard, a sudden chill running through her as she raised a startled gaze to meet her husband’s. “How much like Hikari? When you say… do you mean… outside as in… the Miko’s world?”

Hyoushin nodded grimly.

“So it would appear.” He agreed. “Obviously at present I have no intention to leave Shunhou, and I know Bakaru would not expect me to since there is no way I could reach Hokkan and return before you needed me. My Emperor has said the same — I must be within close reach of the capital since it is such a delicate time for all of us. However, Bakaru has given her his word as a Meihi to help her, and he has given it for me, also. So I am bound to become involved — I must in some way help.”

“May I see the message?” Myoume asked quietly, and Hyoushin nodded, slipping his hand into the folds of his uniform.

“Yes, but it’s written in Meihi script so you may not be able to read it.” He responded, holding out the sheet of parchment. “He doesn’t give much detail. Just that the child’s name is Arina and she’s approximately seventeen summers. She’s known to Hikari, which is his reason for writing to me. Though Hikari is in the South, he seems to think that I’m in a position to ensure her safe transit to Eiyou, where Suzaku’s people can probably help her more.”

“Arina?” Myoume, who had reached out her hand for the letter paused, staring at him in surprise. “Hikari’s said that name to me, too. Her school friend back home was called Arina, I’m almost certain of it.”

“Then it is best that this girl is brought back with her friend, I think.” Lirayi said pensively, taking the sheet of paper and unfolding it, glancing at the contents. “It seems she cannot speak the Meihi language, and is therefore isolated in such a place as Koku-zan. Bakaru would want her among people who could better understand her needs — there are not many Meihi in the village who speak fluently enough the outsider tongue. Maybe one or two — but none as good as Bakaru himself.”

“Bakaru mentioned a woman called Kaeli and her son — Rayi, are they known to you?”

“Kaeli? Yes.” Lirayi re-folded the note, passing it to Myoume. “She escaped from a slave ship and took refuge in Sairou. Her son was born there. She brought him to Hokkan when he was small. The boy is called Kishayi — he is probably the same age as this Arina child, if I remember right.”

She smiled.

“Kaeli speaks Chinese quite well.” She added. “She lived in Sairou for long enough to learn it better than I did till now. Kishayi is very shy and has always kept to the village. I am not sure what use he will be to this stray child. Lilai-nii, what do you intend to do? If you cannot leave here to go to Koku-zan, what will you suggest?”

“The girl must be brought here.” Myoume stared down at the twists and curls of the Meihi script, foreboding filling her heart as the lines and swirls seemed to blur together into an image of a tiger. “Arina. She’s Hikari’s friend, and she’s stranded in a place she doesn’t understand. She should come to Shunhou, Hyoushin. She must.”

“Myoume?” Hyoushin rested a hand on her shoulder, and Myoume bit her lip.

“It felt strange, when you said her name.” She admitted, setting the sheet aside. “I don’t know why, but I feel strongly that she should be here. We can help her, whereas Bakaru can’t. Is there a way to bring them here, without you having to leave the village?”

“Few people would attack Meihi in Hokkan.” Lirayi said reasonably. “If Bakaru or Kaeli accompanied her, she would probably be quite safe. And if then Kutou soldiers met them at the border, there

would be no risk to her in reaching the Emperor's court."

"Are you sure about that, Rayi?" Hyoushin looked worried. "Since Bakaru has given our word…"

"Hokkan-jin like the Meihi." Lirayi said matter-of-factly. "Our crafts are popular and our remedies also sometimes needed. They expect to see us, and they leave us to ourselves for the most part. But they are always friendly. Bakaru said that Hokkan's Emperor once demanded that his coronation throne be carved by Meihi engravers, since they were the most skilled in all of the North country. It is not like Kutou. The Meihi are safe and protected, in Hokkan. If they travel, they are respected… even by thieves and rogues."

"Thieves and rogues don't seek to kill ghosts, I suppose." Hyoushin reflected, and Lirayi nodded.

"There is that, too." She agreed. "Some of the Hokkan-jin believe we possess special powers, even that we are people of Genbu's calling. Bakaru bears the mark, and the biggest Meihi settlement is on Kokuzan, the holy peak where Genbu no Miko buried her treasure. Takiko-sama's memorial stone is also engraved in Meihi script, as far as modern Hokkan-jin are concerned. I do not think you need fear for the girl's safety, so long as she has Meihi protection."

"Then I'll write to Bakaru and tell him to make arrangements to bring the girl to the border." Hyoushin said heavily. "That's the most I can do, in any case. I'll make sure there are guardsmen waiting at the border to escort them to Shunhou — and then, I suppose, we'll see about how to get her to Kounan. Aoiketsu may take her back, I expect, when he returns to his post at Eiyou's court."

"There. It is simple." Lirayi beamed, and Myoume sighed, shaking her head.

"I wish it felt that way." She murmured, clasping her hands together in her lap. "I don't know why, but it makes me feel uneasy. Since you said Arina's name, something stirred inside of me. I don't know what it was… or why. Just… I really think she should come here, Hyoushin. Here first, not Eiyou… maybe not Eiyou at all. Because I want to see her myself."

"Myoume…"

"I can't explain it." Myoume shook her head. "But maybe if I see her — if I meet her face to face — then I'll understand."

Chapter 20

Chapter Nineteen

"Wow."

As the horses drew to a halt outside the palace gates, Haruka let out her breath in a rush, gazing up in awe at the immense building that rose up before them. Gleaming columns of white marble ornamented with gold flanked the entrance, and beyond, the young desert urchin could see people flurrying around in all directions, each bent on a specific errand as they darted from one sumptuous wing of the complex to another.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" Anara's voice behind her made her turn, and she nodded her head.

"I guess the Emperor really is loaded," she murmured. "Shit — I had no idea a real palace looked like that. It's frigging huge… how many people live inside of there, anyhow?"

"In the central, Imperial wing, the Emperor and his Lady wife Rie-sama, as well as his Lord son Prince Nefuru, Lady Sashi and Prince Shinju reside," Zarin answered this time, reining in his steed as he cast her a smile. "In other wings, important officials that are vital to Heiboutei-heika's council have apartments close to the centre of power. And at the very rear of the palace grounds is the barracks, where there are soldiers on duty day and night to serve their King and Queen."

"And we're really going in there?" Haruka swallowed hard. "Are you sure? I mean, it's not like I ain't ever done anythin' bad, an… well…"

"It's all right, Haru-chan," Anara said softly. "You're here with Zarin, aren't you? Noone's going to want to hurt you so long as that's the case."

"I suppose," Haruka cast Zarin a doubtful glance. "I don't really know much about him, though. Anara-san, aren't you coming into the palace too? I mean, you did come here with me, and…"

She faltered, and Anara sighed, reaching across to rest a hand on the young girl's arm.

"I wish I could, but I have no reason to go further than this, and I'm

not an invited guest," she said softly. "I have people back home I have to return to, too, and it's you they want to see. Not an apothecary from the desert. It's Subaru that matters — I'll only be in your way, here."

"You've not been in anyone's way so far, Anara-san," Zarin assured her. "Haruka trusts you, and that's been a big help."

"See, Zarin-dono said that," Haruka scrambled down from the horse, gazing up at her guardian plaintively. "You could come in — it'd be okay."

Anara laughed, shaking her head.

"Believe me, you won't want me here when you've had time to think it over," she said gently, reaching across to ruffle the thick dark waves. "I have a lot of faith in you, Haruka, and in what you can do. But I think that right now you need to learn about Subaru, and if I'm constantly there watching over you, you might find yourself torn."

Haruka's heart clenched in her chest, and she stared up at the older woman sadly.

"Does that mean you don't want me?" she murmured. "Did you only help me because I was Subaru?"

"Oh, don't be silly," Anara scolded, shaking her head. "I don't want to leave you here any more than you want me to, believe me. Even in just a few days I feel as though you've become a part of our family, and the maternal instinct inside of me wants to protect you, not leave you here. Still, my life thus far has taught me that Byakko has a purpose in everything he does, the good and the bad. You have a great destiny and you need to be at the Emperor's court to learn how to achieve that destiny. I wish you were older, and that you knew more about what you could do — but those are things I can't change. So it's best that you come here, to the court that Byakko himself blessed and protected a hundred years ago. Understand? The Emperor is a fine King, and I'm sure Lady Sashi is just as kind a person as Zarin's said. You've nothing to fear."

Her gaze softened as she met the melancholy expression in the young girl's gaze.

"I promise, Haru-chan, that even though this is where we part, it's not the end of our acquaintance," she added gently. "You are *always* welcome back in Shouki-mura. When it's over — when you don't have to be Subaru for Sairou's sake any more — come *home*. All right? You'll always have a place with Shirobu and I — that's for sure. We'd

love to have you, and we'll always welcome you back. No matter how long it takes or how much happens — that will not change. Understand?"

A faint glimmer of light touched the melancholy eyes at this, and Haruka nodded her head.

"I understand," she agreed, her voice trembling slightly. "Thank you for helping me, Anara-san. I promise I'll make you proud. I swear I will."

"I don't doubt that for a moment." Anara dismounted the horse, putting her arms around the youngster and hugging her tightly. "I feel like I'm letting another daughter disappear into the sunset, and I don't like it any more than you do. But Byakko and my family have an unbreakable connection, so I suppose that's part of it. And I meant what I said, one hundred percent. Shouki-mura can always be your home, if you want it to be. You might decide not, after you find out what being Subaru means. But if you ever want it — we'll be there."

"I'll remember." Haruka flung her arms around the older woman, burying her head in her companion's shoulder. "I can't write you or nothin', because I don't know my letters an' I never learnt t' read. But I won't forget. You an' Geiyo-san have been good to me, so I'll make sure I get strong an' help Sairou, no matter what."

"Then we should be heading inside," Zarin, who had observed this scene from a distance interjected at that moment. "I sent a messenger that people should expect us, so it shouldn't be a problem. Haruka, will you come with me? We're strangers yet, I know, but I've no reason to harm you. And when you see Lady Sashi, you'll realise that it's all right."

"I'm coming," Haruka disentangled herself from Anara's embrace, nodding her head resolutely. "I'm coming, Zarin-dono. Just, if I say anything rude or shit, will you jab me or something? I don't want anyone thinkin' I ain't respecting the Queen or the Princess. I jus' don't know how you're s'posed to do stuff like that."

"I'd advise you cut down on the swear words, first of all," Zarin's eyes twinkled. "Well? Will you mount my horse? Or would you rather I dismounted and we walked together through the gates?"

"Walked," Haruka said firmly. "My backside's still achin' from the ride here. I don't wanna get back on another one, an' your nag's kind of snappy."

Anara met Zarin's gaze, a slight smile touching her lips at this.

“Take care of her, Zarin,” she said softly, as the soldier obediently dismounted his steed, slipping the mare’s reins around his fingers. “I know that you’re a responsible man, so I’m trusting you with her. She’s someone very important, so make sure she learns how to harness that fact.”

“I’ll do what I can, depending on Sashi-hime’s instructions,” Zarin agreed. “Don’t worry, Anara-san. I’m sure Haruka’s in safe hands now she’s here — safer than in a desert village.”

“Yes. Doubtlessly,” Anara nodded her head. “Take care, Haru-chan. And remember everything I said… Shouki-mura will still be there, when you’re done.”

“And on that note, let’s go,” Zarin touched Haruka on the shoulder. “This way, Haruka. Keep close to me and noone will question why you’re here. Don’t speak unless you have to — I’ll explain what needs to be said and then you won’t need to worry about being rude. All right?”

“All right,” Haruka nodded slowly. “I guess that’s cool with me.”

She cast Anara one last glance, and then obediently fell into step with the young soldier, glancing up at him as she did so.

“Zarin-dono, you grew up in Eiroku, right?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Did you know Anara-san’s son, Miramu?”

“Not personally, no,” Zarin shook his head. “I knew *of* him, but… well, most people did, to be honest. It wasn’t really… avoidable. Considering…”

He hesitated, then shrugged.

“But the man is dead, so it’s not worth talking about now,” he said briskly. “I may not have found him, but I did find you. That’s more than enough for now. To be honest, I think I prefer it that way. What kind of a person he really was, I can’t tell you — but from the stories, I’m fairly sure he’s not a man I would have liked… or been able to trust this close to my Princess. Don’t worry about the ghosts of departed men, Haruka. Geiyo Miramu’s deeds are legend in the desert land, but they’re also long past. Long, long past.”

“Mm,” Haruka pursed her lips, but fell silent, and as they passed through the big marble-coated gateway, a young soldier on duty darted from the ranks of guardsmen, saluting sharply and casting Haruka a curious look as he did so.

“Zarin-taichou, welcome back!”

“Thank you, Junbei,” Zarin cast the youngster a warm grin, even as he handed over the reins of his horse to one of the other waiting soldiers to deal with. “Have you been sent to meet me?”

“Yes, sir,” Junbei did not relax his stance, nodding curtly, and Haruka raised her gaze to his, curious at this stranger’s unusual appearance. He was not as tall or as old as the well built Zarin, though he was sturdy enough and from his stance and his physique Haruka guessed that he could hold his own in a battle of fists. Hair the colour of mist curled wildly over his brow and in a rough tail down his back, stray wisps of it framing his features and softening his soldier’s expression. Yet, despite the light colour of his hair, his brows and thick lashes were dark enough to be almost black, and something about this sharp contradiction gave the youngster a striking, unusual overall appearance. His complexion was not as dark as the desert-born Zarin’s, either, and the eyes that sparkled beneath his dark brows were a vivid sea aquamarine. In his left ear, he wore a gold stud, and Haruka bit her lip, remembering bits and pieces of a story her father had told her when she had been very small.

“Are you a pirate?” she asked innocently, and Junbei flinched, staring at the youngster in confusion.

“Haruka, shh,” Zarin cast her a glance, shaking his head. “What did I say about speaking only when you’re spoken to? You’re asking questions about things again — and it’s not polite.”

“I only wondered,” Haruka defended herself. “And this guy’s not as important as you, right? He saluted you, and you don’t mind me speaking straight to you — right? So he can’t mind either — he’s not an important noble or anything, so I won’t get my head cut off if I ask him questions.”

Junbei’s eyes widened in disbelief, and despite himself, Zarin chuckled.

“Junbei, at ease,” he said softly. “I know you’re dying to respond, and I ought to give you that right.”

“Yes sir. Thank you, sir.” Junbei lowered his hand, turning to send Haruka a wary glower.

“Who are you?” he demanded. “Of course I’m not a pirate — what kind of question is that?”

“I’m Subaru,” Haruka said calmly. “I have Byakko’s mark and Zarin-dono’s brought me here to see Princess Sashi. You’ve been

waiting for us — haven't you?"

Junbei faltered, taken aback by the child's composure, and Zarin shook his head slowly.

"Haruka, this is Shin Junbei. He's one of the guardsmen serving at the palace, and a man of my own retinue," he said evenly. "He's a soldier and a very good one, too. I don't know why you might think he was a pirate, but I assure you that he's nothing of the sort. It's a long way from the sea here — don't you think so?"

"Haven't a clue," Haruka said cheerfully. "I've never seen the sea, so I wouldn't know. Just Pa used to tell me stories about people from the coast lookin' like this guy — an' he had the earring and shit, too. So I wondered… if he was one of those people, like in Pa's stories."

"Zarin-taichou, with all respect, what is she talking about?" Junbei looked mystified, and Zarin smiled.

"This child is Mai Haruka." He explained simply. "She's the one said to bear the mark of Byakko's Subaru, so as she said, she's here to see Sashi-hime. I guess you could say she's not travelled much, though — so it's probably the first time she's met anyone of Zanji origin. I'm sorry — I don't think she means to offend you."

"Zanji?" Haruka looked blank. "What's Zanji?"

"The Zanji are the people who come originally from Sairou's coast, that's all," Zarin told her. "Junbei's descended from that people, which is why you think he looks like a pirate. But he was born in Arudo, just like a lot of his brethren in the barracks. You really need to learn to think before you speak, Haruka. Sashi-hime is from the northern Funoki — what if you were to ask her questions like that?"

"I wouldn't say something like that to a Princess." Despite herself, Haruka reddened. "I just… I didn't know, that's all. There ain't anyone who looks like him where I was living before."

"No, there aren't many Zanji in the desert," Zarin agreed. "But in Arudo, there's a huge mix of all kinds of peoples. You'll get used to that, now you're here."

He cast Junbei a smile.

"Will you accompany us, and convey the message to Lady Sashi that we're arrived?" he asked quietly. "Then return, if you would. Since Haruka seems to have plenty to say to you, I think it would be well if I put you in charge of her safety, for the time being. I won't be able to guard her myself for long, and your skills are above average

for your age."

"Sir?" Horror glittered in Junbei's sea-coloured eyes, and Haruka snorted.

"I don't need to be protected," she objected. "It's not dangerous here. That's why I came, right? Because it's safer."

"In the palace, it's always better to be safe than sorry." Zarin told her. "Sashi-hime will no doubt insist on it that, while you're here, someone is assigned to take care of you and make sure you're not in danger. It's just the way of things."

Junbei's lips thinned, and Zarin cast him a questioning look.

"Do you have an objection, Junbei?" he asked softly, and Junbei faltered, then shook his head.

"No, sir," he said reluctantly. "If it's an order, then of course I'll do as you say. I'll go immediately to convey your message to Lady Sashi."

He saluted again, casting Haruka a final glower before disappearing across the courtyard.

"Do I really need him to be watching over me now I'm here?" Haruka asked, as she and Zarin made their way slowly in the direction he had gone. "He ain't that much older'n me, an' I don't think he likes me much. He might slit my throat with his sword soon as look at me, an' besides, if I'm Byakko's, don't you think I could defend myself if I had to?"

"I told you. It's protocol. The Princess has my retinue to keep her safe even though I don't think anyone in the palace would dream of hurting her," Zarin told her. "Prince Nefuru has soldiers too, and so does the Emperor and Empress Rie. It's a sign that you're important here, if nothing else. Don't you think so?"

"Maybe." Haruka pursed her lips, thinking this over. "But he really looked at me like he wanted t'kill me. An' that ain't a good start."

"Well, you should hold your tongue, shouldn't you?" Zarin chided her gently. "I'm serious about that, Haruka. Junbei's a good soldier, even if he is only seventeen, and he's true to the orders he's given. He is a little sensitive about his heritage, however. Shouting about it isn't going to put you on his good side, so you might want to rethink that."

"Sensitive about it?" Haruka stared. "Because he looks weird?"

"He doesn't look weird. I told you already, he's of Zanji descent."

"So? That's weird enough for me." Haruka touched her dark hair

pensively, then, “I don’t think I ever saw anyone with that colour hair before. An’ his eyes were like he looked right through me. Though I guess he could be kind of pretty, if he wasn’t salutin’ and scowlin’ so much. Still…”

“Haruka, do you ever shut up?”

“Guess not.” Haruka looked sheepish. “Sorry. But really, I don’t get it. Why would he care if I asked him if he was a pirate? All he’d have to say is no, he wasn’t. I don’t even know if pirates are real. Pa only told me stories an’ then only when he was drunk. It might’ve all been made up.”

“Pirates do exist, so far as I know, though I’ve never met any.” Zarin hid a smile, and Haruka felt that her companion was somewhat humouring her. “But I’d advise you don’t talk too much to Junbei about that side of his heritage. As I said, it’s a sore point with him… and it’s better not discussed.”

“I still don’t see why.” Haruka pouted. “It’s no big deal t’me. I was just curious.”

“Junbei was born illegitimate,” Zarin told her simply. “That’s all.”

“What’s ille… ili… ille… what’s that mean?”

“His mother and father weren’t married when he was born.”

“Oh.” Haruka thought this over carefully for a moment, then she shrugged.

“I don’t even know if my Ma and Pa were or not,” she admitted. “Does it matter, if they were?”

“In Arudo society, it does,” Zarin agreed. “So it’s better you don’t ask him too much about it.”

“All right,” Haruka sighed. “If you say so, then I won’t.”

“Good girl.” Zarin grinned, patting her on the head again, and Haruka pulled away.

“Don’t keep doing that, like I’m some pet dog,” she protested. “I’m not that little a kid, you know.”

“My apologies.” Zarin’s eyes twinkled. “I didn’t mean to belittle you. Besides, this is where we’re heading. This is Lady Sashi’s wing.”

“This… whole wing… belongs to Princess Sashi?” Haruka’s eyes widened, and Zarin nodded.

“She is the Princess Consort,” he reminded her. “We’ll wait here for

a moment, for Junbei to return. It'd be bad manners to just barge right in — better we wait for him to tell us she's ready."

"Shit, there really is a lot of rules to this etiquette thing, ain't there?" Haruka observed, and Zarin smiled.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," he agreed. "But you'll pick up the important ones if you listen and learn. I really don't think you're at all stupid, and you certainly seem to want to know everything that's going on around you, whether the questions are impertinent or not."

"I'll never remember all of that," Haruka said heavily. "I'm a desert rat. I know how t'make fires out of stray twigs an' steal apples from market stalls without gettin' caught. I don't know nothin' about speakin' to royalty."

"I'd mention less about apple-stealing when you see the Princess, too," Zarin advised lightly. "All right?"

Haruka reddened.

"I guess," she acknowledged.

"Taichou, Sashi-hime would like you to take the child and go through to her main parlour," Junbei returned at that moment, saluting his captain once more as he did so. "She says she's been eagerly awaiting your return and looks forward to meeting the girl face to face."

"Then that's our cue to enter," Zarin cast Haruka a smile. "You look fairly presentable, considering the long ride — just follow my lead and wait for the Princess to speak before you speak back. All right? It'll be fine."

"All… all right," Haruka swallowed hard, feeling the apprehension curling up inside of her. "Is *he* coming with us too?"

She jerked her head in Junbei's direction, and the young soldier bristled at her dismissive gesture.

Zarin nodded.

"Of course," he agreed simply. "I said it, didn't I? I'm going to entrust you to Junbei's care once this meeting was over. His duty is to accompany us to see his mistress, too — a fact he knows as well as anyone. Don't you, Junbei?"

"Yes, Taichou," Junbei agreed, though Haruka could see the glitter of irritation in his unusual eyes.

"Then it's settled." Zarin's eyes twinkled with humour. "This way,

both of you. Remember to smile, Haruka — and most of all, to answer as honestly as you know how."

Haruka nodded her head, a sudden lump rising in her throat as they reached the ornate doors of the inner chamber. She clasped her hands together anxiously as the guards on duty saluted Zarin, pushing the doors back to admit them into the Princess's own particular quarters.

As she stepped over the threshold, Haruka caught the toes of her shoes on the step and she let out a yelp, almost going flying headlong into the chamber. Rough hands grabbed her, however, hauling her to her feet, and at the casual manhandling she cast a glower upwards, meeting Junbei's annoyed gaze with an indignant one of her own.

"Get your hands off me," she hissed, wrenching herself free. "I can walk by myself."

"It really looks like it, too," Junbei snapped back, his tones low enough that only she could hear him. "You're meeting the Princess Consort — at least try and hold yourself upright."

"Zarin, welcome back to Arudo."

Before the conversation could continue any further, a fresh voice broke through Haruka's irritation, and she turned to see a slim, petite figure rising from her seat by the furthest wall, stepping daintily down from the dais towards them. A few feet away she paused, her lips twitching into a warm smile.

"I have always had faith in your abilities to carry out my orders, but I didn't expect such swift success, even from you," she added softly, and Haruka noticed the faintly foreign-sounding intonation of the woman's words. Absently she wracked her brains to remember what Zarin had called her. Funoki? Had that been it? Was that from Sairou or not? Haruka didn't know for sure, but as she eyed the Princess curiously, she saw that the young woman that stood before them was also striking in appearance, with eyes as deep black as her long dark tresses providing a stark contrast with her delicate, pale complexion.

At her gaze, the Princess's smile widened, and she held out a hand.

"Your name, I understand, is Mai Haruka?" she asked gently. "That's correct, child?"

"Y… yes, ma'am," Haruka struggled back to the matter at hand, belatedly bowing her head as she remembered whose company she had entered. "That's right."

“I see. And you are how old, Haruka-chan?”

“I… really don’t know, Hime-sama,” Haruka admitted. “Twelve, maybe. Thirteen, perhaps. I’m not sure.”

“Twelve or thirteen,” The Princess clicked her tongue against her teeth as she thought this over. Then she nodded. “I understand you’ve been in the care of people known to Zarin… people in the village known as Shouki-mura?”

For some reason, this question lodged in Haruka’s heart and she faltered, a sense of unease washing through her young body as she gazed at the Princess anew. She was beautiful, yes, but for the first time since she had entered the room the youngster saw something else beyond the beauty. In the depths of those black eyes glittered something cold enough to suggest they had been carved from ebony, and as she stood there, suddenly Haruka had a vague sense that she’d met the woman somehow before. In that instant, she knew that she did not want to tell the Princess about the kind family who had looked after her or, for that matter, that their own children had as strong a connection to Byakko themselves.

“Haruka?” Zarin cast her a glance. “Sashi-hime is asking you a question… please try to answer it.”

“I…” Haruka swallowed hard, struggling to regain her composure as inwardly she made up her mind. “I don’t know as it’s quite like that, though. I mean, I stopped in Shouki-mura but only for a few days. The apothecary helped me because I was hurt, but I don’t belong to them or to that village, not really. I’ve… I’ve taken care of myself since I was six, since my Pa died an’ I was on my own. I don’t really have… family.”

Zarin shot her a startled look, and Haruka clenched and unclenched her fists inside the long sleeves of her gown, raising her gaze to meet Sashi’s enquiring dark eyes.

“I’m a desert rat,” she added. “So I’m pretty much by myself.”

“A desert rat,” Sashi’s brows knitted together, and Haruka could tell that the woman was considering this carefully. “With no family or ties of your own?”

“Y… yes, ma’am.”

“You said you were hurt,” Sashi looked thoughtful. “And Zarin, I believe you mentioned to me in your communication that the child had had some unpleasant encounter in the Kanin mountains. I would like to hear more about this incident, if you don’t mind.”

She smiled.

“Haruka, the people of the North have a tradition and a faith in a mage called Kitora,” she added, her tones deceptively sweet and gentle. “My family have always been gifted in receiving messages of spiritual nature. Maybe if you tell me what it was that happened in the mountains, I might find a way to explain it. I am right, I think, when I say that you were attacked by an evil spirit when you were there?”

“I… think so,” Haruka felt uneasy again, as the Princess’s eyes bored into her. “I don’t really know what it was, Hime. It was jus… it came out of the wall, an’ it killed two of my friends. An’ Anara-san an’ Geiyo-san went t’bury them, an’ saw that something had written ‘revenge’ on the cave wall. I don’t know, myself, cos I don’t read. But it seemed like somethin’ took over my friend’s body an’ sh… stuff, before she died. I don’t know what, but it thought it should kill me. Because… because it knew I was… Subaru.”

The Princess’s eyes narrowed.

“A demon spirit attacked you because you were Subaru?” she repeated, and Haruka nodded her head, again getting the sensation that the Princess understood far more about the encounter than she had let on.

“And what happened next?”

“I ran away,” Haruka admitted. “I ran an’ ran till I collapsed in Shouki-mura. Then Zarin-dono came an’ I came here.”

“Well, that was fortunate,” Sashi reflected, “especially if your situation was as hopeless as it sounds. As a Princess, I can’t understand what it must be like to be abandoned and alone without anyone to call on for help. But surely such a life must have been a burden for you, my child… surely it must have been a welcome release to find that you bore Byakko’s mark and were therefore able to escape it and come to Arudo in Zarin’s capable care.”

“I…” Haruka faltered again, then, “If I can help Sairou then I promised that I’d do that. So I will.”

“And you believe that by coming here, you can do that?” Sashi’s question was gentle enough, but again Haruka felt a chill rush through her body at the Princess’s soft words. “A commendable thought. Thank you for coming here, Haruka. Sairou will no doubt one day be in your debt.”

She took a step or two forward, resting her hands gently on

Haruka's shoulders, and as soon as she did so, Haruka felt the surge of something dark tingle through her shoulders. Her eyes widened, and she stared up at the Princess in alarm as a sudden recollection flooded her senses.

"In the mountain…" she whispered, loud enough that only the Princess could hear her, and at her words, Sashi's smile widened.

"Will you show me Byakko's mark?" she asked gently. "I'm sure that you must be aware of it — and I've never seen one for myself. I would like to see it, Haruka. Your mark of Subaru interests me greatly."

"It's… on my chest," Haruka instinctively folded her arms across her body in a protective gesture. "An' I'm not taking my clothes off when there are men present."

Her tone was defiant, and Zarin opened his mouth to reproach her, but Sashi held up her hands.

"The child is right," she said simply. "It was wrong of me to ask — she is a young woman at a sensitive age and to bare her skin before men who she barely knows would be an unreasonable request."

The cool smile returned to her lips, and Haruka saw a flicker of something in the depths of her gaze once more.

"Very well," she reflected. "For the time being, Mai Haruka, I have made arrangements for you to stay at the palace. You have had a long journey, and are clearly tired. We will talk more, I'm sure, when you are rested. I trust that if I leave you in Zarin's hands, he will ensure you are adequately protected from any dangers. Am I correct, Zarin?"

"I have already instructed Junbei to keep watch over her, my Lady." Zarin bowed his head, and Sashi looked pleased.

"Then it is decided," she agreed. "Shin Junbei, take the child and see to it that she has the ultimate in secure accommodation for the duration of her stay. She is young and vulnerable and we must protect her from harm — so I will be relying on you to ensure that she is never able to wander these halls by herself. I would hate it if she got into danger, when Sairou may rely on her in the months to come."

Haruka flinched at the Princess's words, staring at her in confusion, and Sashi sent her a knowing, meaningful smile.

"Go with Junbei, Haruka," she murmured, and the soldier bowed to acknowledge his command, beginning to lead the youngster resignedly towards the exit. "I will speak to you again soon. Zarin, I

have things to discuss with you, so please, remain. You have done well — but I realise you went there originally in search of another. Tell me, what became of the one who bore the soul of Amefuri?"

"Amefuri's dead!" Before Zarin could respond, Haruka blurted out the truth, ignoring the dismayed look Junbei gave her as she ran back into the centre of the chamber. "Amefuri-san died a year and a half ago! He killed himself an' his ashes got scattered, Hime — Amefuri is dead!"

As she did so, she tripped once more over her unfamiliar footwear, sprawling onto her knees at the Princess's feet, and as she glanced up, she was aware of a combination of shock and pleasure crossing the other woman's gaze.

"Haruka, you forget yourself!" Zarin said sharply, and Haruka cast him an anguished glance, shaking her head.

"Geiyo-san and Anara-san lost him a year and a half ago. They told me, but it hurts them a lot to talk about it," she said honestly. "He died in Kutou, so it ain't nothin' to do with them an' I don't want them to be upset again because of it. I'm here, an' if you want me to do Byakko things then I'll try, I really will. But Amefuri-san died, an' he can't be brought back. So there's no point in looking for him."

Sashi was silent for a moment, as if digesting this. Then she met Zarin's gaze, a question in her ebony eyes.

"Is this the truth, Zarin?" she asked quietly, and Zarin sighed, nodding his head.

"I have confirmed that Geiyo Miramu — the man said to be born with Amefuri's soul — passed away in Kutou a year and a half ago," he said respectfully. "I have heard it from many sources, so I believe it to be the truth. He is a well known figure in Eiroku and the surrounds, due to his acts there eleven years ago, so stories like that spread swiftly. I'm sorry, Hime — in that regard I have failed. I will not be able to locate the one who allegedly bore Amefuri's mark."

"No. No, it is no matter." A faint smile touched the corners of Sashi's lips, and Haruka was struck cold by the satisfaction that briefly crossed the princess's expression. "In Kutou? How interesting. I wonder what fate drew him there, and what tragedy drove him to take his own life in such a place. Still, as the girl says, there is nothing to be done about a man who is already in Byakko's care. It is as well to know because there's no sense in sending out men and using resources on a hopeless quest."

She cast Haruka a glance, then nodded.

“For now, we have you,” she murmured. “I think that Kitora would be content with that, at the very least.”

She gestured towards the door.

“Junbei.”

“Yes, Hime. My apologies,” Junbei bowed hastily before his Princess once more, grasping Haruka firmly by the arms. “I’ll do as you instruct right away.”

“I already told you not to grab me!” Haruka protested, but Junbei took no notice, hauling her forcibly from the chamber and out into the corridors beyond.

“You have some damn nerve, brat,” he snapped, once they were out of the Princess’s hearing. “Rushing back in like that as though you were speaking to just anyone. Do you have any concept of how some of the nobles would treat you, if you acted like that to them? You’re lucky Sashi-hime’s as understanding and as kind as she is, else it could’ve been your head for insolence.”

“I didn’t mean to go flying like that. I’m just not used to wearing things on my feet,” Haruka glanced down resentfully at her shoes. “I never needed them in the desert — it’s not my fault if I don’t know how to walk properly in things like this.”

“I was talking about you speaking out of turn,” Junbei said flatly. “Didn’t you listen to the Taichou? He told you to hold your tongue, right? Are you incapable of obeying orders?”

“Dunno. Never really had to think about it,” Haruka responded with a shrug. “I’ve always made my own rules, I s’pose. But I didn’t mean to be rude to anyone. It’s just that Geiyo-san and Anara-san were kind to me, an’ I know that it upsets them, talkin’ about Miramu-san an’ all. So I wanted Sashi-hime to know that, too. I’m here to help, if I can — but they can’t bring back a dead man.”

“No kidding,” Junbei muttered. “You didn’t have to go make such a show of it.”

Haruka shivered.

“I didn’t like it in there,” she admitted. “If talking to all royal folk is like that, I’d rather stick with you an’ Zarin-dono. Even if you do look like a pirate, at least you talk normally.”

“I’m not a goddamn pirate!” Junbei shot back, and Haruka

frowned, shaking her head.

"Sorry. I told Zarin-dono I wouldn't talk about that any more," she remembered, looking apologetic. "Cos you hate it or something, right? Talkin' about bein' Zanji or whatever it was."

Junbei sighed, shaking his head.

"Just shut up, all right?" he ordered. "I can't believe I've got to babysit a brat like you… yeesh. Orders are orders, but even so…"

"Junbei, do you like Sashi-hime?" Haruka asked softly, and the soldier frowned, casting her a startled look.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I? She's a kind mistress, and understanding."

"No reason," Haruka frowned, her mind flitting back to the sensation she had felt when Sashi's fingers had touched her shoulders.

"I guess it just seemed… like there was somethin' dark goin' on in that room," she said at length. "Somethin' weird and creepy. I didn't like her. I didn't like her eyes. They were cold an' hard an' looked right through me. I didn't like that at all."

Junbei's brows knitted together.

"You better not say that a second time in these parts, else Nefuru-sama will be on your case," he warned her roughly. "Listen. Sashi-hime is very popular here, not to mention that she's the daughter of a powerful northern noble family. Jus' because you ain't used to seein' people who don't look like you an' the other folk livin' in an' around the Kanin mountains doesn't mean you can make comments about them an' shit. This is Arudo, not some backwater. There are lots of different peoples here. You can't jus' look at folk an' decide they're somethin' on that. It's just like I'm not a pirate. I ain't never even been to Kaidou or Shifu, or seen the sea. So learn to button your lip, all right?"

"I didn't think Sashi-hime was a pirate." Haruka said, her expression uncharacteristically solemn. "I thought she was very pretty — maybe the prettiest person I've ever seen, if I'm honest. She doesn't look weird in the same way you do — it's not like that."

"I do not look weird!"

"You do," Haruka was unmoved. "But it's different, somehow, with her."

"An' I'm telling you now, if you want to survive in Arudo, don't

criticise the royal family," Junbei said smartly. "I'm serious. I ain't the only soldier who won't listen to shit said against them. Okay? You'll make yourself a bunch of enemies if you carry on in that vein, and I won't be protecting you if cross that line too far. Understood?"

Haruka sighed heavily.

"Men are so stupid," she murmured. "They really don't listen."

"Haruka!"

"Okay, I get it. I'll shut up," Haruka shrugged. "You won't get it, even if I try and explain it, anyhow. So there's no point. Take me wherever it is you're taking me, okay? I'll work it out for myself. I don't need your help, in any case. Yours or anyone's. But I bet you I'm right."

She poked his arm, causing him to send her a dark glower.

"You'll see," she added, a challenge in her voice. "I bet you anything you like that I am."

"That's the lot for today, I think."

Shi Maichu heaved the last sack onto the pile, pausing to cast his companion a tired grin. It was late in the morning, and already he and a group of his bandit companions had been out since dawn on the mountainside, waylaying the many travellers who chose to use the quickest route from Sairou into the Southern lands. For many who travelled the road regularly, a brief encounter with Reikaku-zan's legendary protectors meant handing over an amount towards the upkeep of local villages, and for the most part these days traders had accepted that this cost was generally lower than paying to stable horses and find accommodation in a profiteering border town like Hengei or Souun. However, there were still those who tried to avoid paying the bandits' dues, and in these instances, the mountain men were not averse to resorting to their swords to enforce their demands.

That morning had been no exception, as they had encountered cloth traders doing their best to sneak across the mountain territory by way of a little known path that led to Souun. When challenged, they had claimed to be nothing more than poor travellers seeking shelter, but Reikaku-zan's men had heard that excuse many a time before and within a short space of time had teased not only the truth but their toll plus penalties from the unfortunate traders.

"We did good this morning, Shishi — you wouldn't believe how much cloth merchants can hide when they put their mind to it."

“Cloth traders, huh?” Shishi leant up against the wall of the chamber, eying the spoils pensively. “Did they cry this time, or did you just have to
threaten to slash their belts to get them to cough up, huh? Cloth merchants are usually sappy when it comes to border control — Papa always says they’re stingy as they come about payin’ the regulation toll.”

“Well, they were first-timers, Aniki thought.” Maichu pulled a scrap of worn fabric from his pocket, dusting his hands clean of mountain dirt. “Came by the route thinking they could outsmart Reikaku-zan’s bandits. The fact that we know all the pathways better than any strangers from the Western lands seems to have completely passed ’em by.”

“Says the oaf from the Eastern lands who’s only been squattin’ in these parts a year and a half.” Shishi teased him, and Maichu snorted, shrugging his shoulders.

“Long enough to know my way around,” he assured her. “I’ve always been good at finding tracks in and out of places — piece of cake.”

“Ah yes. The Dancing Spider,” Shishi looked amused. “Well, I guess you had t’be good at something, right?”

“Shut up, cheeky wench.” Maichu tossed the rag in her direction, and Shishi caught it deftly, throwing it back.

“You’ll have to do better’n that to catch me out,” she told him frankly. “Well? It looks like a lot — did you take the entire amount in fabric or what?”

“No. That was extra,” Maichu shook his head, “for the insult to Reikaku-zan, Aniki said. *Although* I think it’s got more to do with a woman in one o’ the villages who’s husband died last week an’ who has seven kids to find summer clothes for, if y’ask me. He’s soft at heart, that one — I’ve learnt that much since I’ve been here.”

“Aniue’s always been like that about the villagers. More’n Papa, in some ways,” Shishi agreed. “Aniue’s village an’ family were wiped out by poverty, famine an’ plague, so he gets it probably best of anyone how bad these places suffer. Still, if that’s the case, it’s all for the good, right? It ain’t easy for any family to raise seven kids in this area — an’ if she’s a widow now too, even worse.”

“Yeah, that’s it,” Maichu nodded. “Not paying toll it is like saying you don’t care if the local people round hereabouts starve or die, and

I'm with Aniki in that regard. Besides, rich folks like that should've known better'n to try and dupe us. The mountain toll is the toll and that's that. Right?"

"Mm," Shishi grinned, perching herself on the windowsill. "You know, once I heard merchants had complained to Reizeitei-sama about our tolls an' our methods of collectin' them. It was a funny story in the end. He's so damn cunning, that Emperor of ours, I swear. He asked them all kinds o' questions, heard their whole story out in that calm, sympathetic Imperial way of his, and then he nicely told them that his job was to ensure *all* the people in Kounan had enough t'eat and so on. He never said it in so many words, but he pretty much implied that the tolls were with his approval an' that if the fat cats didn't like it they should detour their routes elsewhere an' pay more on accommodation in city inns rather than think they can take a short cut through the mountains. Papa was there — he an' Aniki both went on Reizeitei-sama's request, but they never had to say more'n a word because the Emperor already had it in mind how to deal with it for keeps. The whole thing was dealt with all civil an' legal like — noone's tried t'question our right to do it since."

"Reizeitei-sama knows we ain't in the business to kill folk, or make profit for ourselves," Maichu reflected. "So long as Kashira's here, this mountain protects the villages. So long as that happens, the Emperor ain't goin' to interfere. Nothin' he can do in Eiyou that's better for the people round Souun than what we can do here… and I've learned that more'n more since I came to live here. While I dunno what my folks would make of it if they knew I'd changed careers from Imperial guardsman to mountain bandit, to me it doesn't seem like the values are all that different. Both means protecting something important, so it seems fine to me."

"Right." Shishi nodded. "The mountain's always been a key player round here anyway. S'how it was before Papa was Kashira, an' he's made the tradition even stronger. There used t'be nobles governing the South West, but it always wound up in problems somehow cos they didn't understand the people an' the people didn't trust them. Since the war with Kutou, it sort'a fell to Reikaku-zan to take charge an' these days everything is fine. Jus' goes t'show what a good Kashira Papa is, I guess."

There was a note of pride in her voice at this, and Maichu laughed.

"Not that you're biased," he teased her.

"No…" Shishi pursed her lips. "I jus' wish, given all that, he'd damn well lighten up about lettin' me come with you to get toll. I ain't sure

if he thinks I'm gonna vaporise the mountain with Do-nee's magic or if he thinks I'm gonna be raped or killed or somethin', but considerin' I crossed the four corners of this world with Hiki, he might cut me some slack from time to time. It sucks bein' part of the clean-up party after. I wanna be a proper bandit sometimes too, y'know — him protectin' me because I'm a girl kinda defeats the object of me provin' bein' a bandit an' a girl ain't a problem."

"Your Pa looks out for you, that's all," Maichu said sensibly. "You know that you're a kickass fighter an' so does he. But the rest o' Kounan's male population are still goin' to look at you as a chick in bandit getup. An' you're a *pretty* chick, which doesn't help things any. If you were butt ugly, you might be able t'scare 'em off with your face — but as it is, they'll want t'get close enough to see your attitude an' feel more'n just your blade… an' I'm pretty sure that's the bit Kashira has issue with."

"Thanks, I think." Shishi sent him a rueful look, and Maichu grinned sheepishly.

"I'm just saying," he responded. "That's how it seems to me."

"Well, I didn't ask to be 'pretty', as you put it," Shishi said frankly. "It's a goddamn nuisance, if you're right. But Papa's said things like it before, an' Hiki's touched on it, too. I guess I'll have t'work on being more kickass an' less appealin' — maybe I'll cut my hair off an' crop it short or somethin'. That'd do it, right? They'd not bother about me then, would they?"

She fingered her thick red locks thoughtfully, and anxiety flooded Maichu's gaze.

"You dare do that an' Anzu-sama'll have my head!" he exclaimed. "Shit, if I put that kind of idea into your mind — forget I said anythin'!"

"Relax. I ain't gonna do it right now," Shishi assured him, releasing her grip. "Okaa-san would definitely freak, an' besides, this is like my badge of identity — it's the same colour as Papa's hair an' a sign I belong here. But sometimes it bugs me. I don't have any time for bein' pretty or girly. Suzaku did me no favours, in the end."

"If you looked more like Kashira, it'd have been better," Maichu reflected absently, and Shishi shot him a startled glance.

"Are you sayin' Kashira's ugly, now?"

"I didn't say that," Maichu held up his hands hurriedly. "Not that. But jus', he's more of a predator to look at than you, is all. He looks

like the wolf. You…"

He paused, eying her critically, then he shrugged.

"Wolves are hunters," he added at length. "But people don't look at 'em as cuddly or nothin' like that. You might be a lion, Shishi, but you sure as hell don't carry the same aura. You look too much like Anzu-sama, an' Anzu-sama's a damn fine lookin' woman. Even if you did cut off your hair — I don't think you'd be able to change it."

"Damn," Shishi grimaced, glancing at her hands. "Oh well. Then I'll just have to get stronger, an' noone will want to touch me."

"This is peacetime, you know," Maichu dropped down onto the pile of sacks, eying her questioningly. "Why the sudden obsession with strength an' fighting? Taking on toll evaders an' fightin' Kaou-zan are little things compared to the shit we were wound up in a year an' a half ago. Why are you so bothered about it? Surely there's nothin' excitin' in doin' any of those things."

"No… maybe not," Shishi agreed. "But it's not so much that. It's just…"

She faltered, her pretty bronze eyes clouding, and Maichu frowned.

"Just?"

"Do-nee's picked up some odd vibes of late, is all," Shishi sighed. "An' when Hiki was here the last time, she said somethin' about it, too. Like somethin's up — somethin's in the pipeline an' it's more than just Kaou-zan risin' up against us. It's not just imagination, because Chichiri's apparently sensed it as well. But noone knows what an' it's got me twitchy. Especially now Hiki's taken off to Kutou all of a sudden — I don't like it."

"Hikari's gone to visit Myoume, hasn't she?" Maichu looked surprised. "She went with Aoi and the royal dame he's escorting. What's suspect about that?"

"Nothing," Shishi admitted. "I won't pretend I ain't a little jealous, though. I ain't seen Myoume in over a year either, and she's my friend too."

"Do you really think you'd wanna travel with some foreign princess?" Maichu snorted. "You'd have to mind your manners all the time — it wouldn't be like visiting Reizeitei-sama at his court."

"I know," Shishi acknowledged. "It'd be a drag, an' when Chichiri told me she was goin', he also told me that, too. I'm a big girl, so I'll get over it. It's just… when Chichiri told me, he didn't seem worried

about sending her, even though it's such a long trip an' he always worries about her ridin' from Eiyou back here when it's gettin' darker in the evenings. He seemed glad, actually, that she was goin'."

"Glad?" Maichu echoed, and Shishi nodded.

"He said it was the best thing to do," she agreed. "An' I don't think he meant that Hiki needed a change of scene or some private time with Aoi. I think he meant something else — he's my uncle, so I can generally tell when he's got more to say than he's saying outright. I think he had one of his hunches — an' Hiki's trip is part of his playin' it out."

"Yeesh," Maichu let out a low whistle. "Crafty bastard, ain't he?"

"Always," Shishi nodded. "Whatever it is, though, he hasn't told me. He just said it would be for the best… if Hiki went to see Myoume in Kutou."

"Think the Kashira knows?"

"Probably not," Shishi sighed. "*Hiki* probably doesn't even know. Chichiri doesn't believe in worrying people unless he has to. He doesn't realise that these days other people can sense the weirdness he can, at least a little bit. We jus' can't pull all the secret meanings out of it that he seems to."

"Maybe you should ask him straight."

"Maybe," Shishi admitted. "Though I ain't sure… do I really want to know the answer? Last time shit happened here, Jin got killed. I ain't looking to be part of something else like that."

"If Hikari's gone to Kutou, who says that it's anything to do with Reikaku-zan at all?" Maichu asked. "Though Kutou ain't the mess it was before Kikei died, so I don't see what'd be happening there now. Maybe it's innocent. Maybe it has nothin' to do with these vibes. Maybe Hikari jus' really wanted to see Myoume. I dunno. You might be readin' too much into nothing."

"Perhaps I am," Shishi rubbed her temples. "An' I'll miss her not being here, which is an added pain. It's stupid how much time I spend with Hiki considering I only met her eighteen months ago, but she's probably the closest friend I have, so it sucks when she's away. Still, I'll deal with it. Like I said, I'm a big girl."

"No different than me missin' Aoi, an' I grew up with him," Maichu reminded her. "Six years sharin' quarters in the barracks. I do get it."

"Girls are different from guys, though."

“An’ I thought you said you weren’t trying to be girlish.”

“Ah, damn you. Shut up,” Shishi pulled a graphic face. “That ain’t what I mean.”

“Pull that face more often an’ noone will even vaguely think you pretty,” Maichu advised, ducking out of her way as the bandit lunged towards him. “I’m serious — if you make that your war mask, you’ll have people running for the hills.”

“You kids seem cheerful in here.”

Before Shishi could respond, the door of the chamber swung open to reveal the bandit Kashira himself and, as he stepped into the room, Shishi let out an exclamation as she registered that her father was not alone.

“Chichiri! Shit, are you psychic now, too? We were jus’ talking about you, and here you damn well are!”

“Good afternoon to you too, Shishi-chan,” Chichiri’s lips twitched into a warm smile, but there was something preoccupied in his ruby gaze and Maichu frowned.

“Shishi thinks something’s up, in the way you sent Hikari to Kutou,” he said abruptly. “Is she right, or just following some woman’s whim that makes no sense at all?”

“Hey!” Shishi put her hands on her hips. “You pipe down already, okay? This isn’t to do with you — even if there was something in the air it’d hit your block-headed brain and bounce right off again, so don’t make it sound like I’m off my rocker!”

“Pipe down, the pair of you,” Tasuki ordered, holding up his hands as he cast a glower from one youngster to the other. “That’s one reason Chichiri’s here, an’ if you both shut up you’ll find out about it for yourselves, all right? He came up early this mornin’ and we’ve been talkin’ things over — considerin’ you were both involved with Hikari two summers ago, he thought it best we spoke to you too.”

“About Hiki?” Shishi cast her uncle a quizzical gaze, and Chichiri shook her head.

“Not exactly,” he said, pushing back a couple of stray bags and settling himself on one of the room’s dusty, battered seats. “I would have spoken to you sooner, but Tasuki said that Maichu was still out collecting toll, and I didn’t want to have to go through the story twice if I didn’t have to.”

“Twice?” Maichu’s ears pricked up. “You mean you didn’t jus’ come

here to tell Shishi — you want *me* involved in whatever this is, too?"

"Shouldn't you be?" Tasuki cast him a questioning glance. "You're one of my bandits, ain't you?"

"Well, for sure, but…"

"An' I've said it's cool, so what're you bellyachin' about?" Tasuki grinned, giving his subordinate a friendly clip around the ear. "Shut up and listen already, I told you. I was the one who suggested you'd be in on all this, but if you speak outta line, I can always send you to collect firewood or polish blades."

"I'm shutting up," Maichu held up his hands hurriedly, and Shishi laughed.

"I think, on the whole, including Maichu is the right thing," Chichiri continued. "Shishi, do you remember out chat the other day, when I told you of Hikari's plans to travel with Aoi and the Princess Ouba to Kutou?"

"Yes," Shishi nodded. "That's what I was talkin' to Maichu about, actually. About how you thought it'd be a good thing for Hiki to go, rather than bein' worried about her makin' such a long journey."

"Well, I am worried about it," Chichiri admitted, looking rueful. "Hikari is almost as much a daughter to me now as Meikyo, and I'd be devastated if anything happened to her. But even so, sometimes I can't let that bias the decisions that I make. Especially since she's something more to Kounan than just another young girl."

"Suzaku no Shinzahou," Shishi murmured, and Chichiri nodded.

"And that's why you sent her to Kutou?" Maichu looked confused. "Seiryuu was raised already, right? Don't tell me she's gotta do it all over again?"

"No. I don't think Seiryuu will be making a second appearance over Kutou," Despite himself, Chichiri laughed. "Don't look so worried, Maichu. Your land is healing, and I'm sure there are great things to come from it in the future. Certainly on the two occasions I met with your Emperor, I liked his way of seeing things. And, with a steady companion like Hyoushin on board, I think it's unlikely that the East will be able to slip backwards into bad habits."

"Then why?" Shishi looked foxed. "I don't get it. What's happening in Kutou if not something to do with Seiryuu?"

Chichiri was silent for a moment, then,

“Shishi, what has Doryoku told you about the changes in the atmosphere lately?” he asked lightly, and Shishi snorted.

“Doryoku? All she’s said is that things are afoot. Something’s happening. She’s not sure what and nor am I — that really ain’t enough to be goin’ on with, when it comes to making decisions about what to do.”

“I see. No, I can understand that,” Chichiri nodded. “All right. What would you say, then, if I told you that when I went to Eiyou to see Reizeitei-sama, I picked up the distinctive features of a Shichi Seishi?”

“You looked in a mirror?” Maichu suggested, and Tasuki gave him another light cuff around the ear.

“This is serious, so knock it off,” he warned, though a faint smile touched his lips. “Go on, Chichiri. They’re too stupid to guess it, so you’ll haveta spell it out for ’em.”

“Ow, that hurts!” Maichu objected, rubbing his ear. “I was only tryin’ to lighten the mood… yeesh.”

“So I’m guessing from that that it wasn’t a Suzaku Seishi, an’ it obviously wasn’t a Seiryuu one, since they’re all dead ’cept Amiboshi,” Shishi looked uncharacteristically thoughtful. Then she let out an exclamation, her eyes widening.

“If it was one of Genbu’s, Do-nee’d know all about it,” she realised. “An’ you said yourself, Chichiri, that Hikari was goin’ to see Myoume… an’ travellin’ with *people from the West*. That’s it, isn’t it? Something’s goin’ down in Sairou an’ because we’re here near the border, you want us to keep our eyes open an’ all that!”

“Got it in one,” Chichiri offered her a warm smile. “That’s it exactly.”

“So something’s goin’ down in Sairou, not in Kutou at all?” Maichu still looked bewildered. “Yet they’re all off to Shunhou to have a party? I don’t get it.”

“Don’t be stupid, you oaf, it’s obvious,” Shishi cast him a disparaging look. “Think about it. Myoume’s Toroki. Right? If anyone knows anything about Byakko, it’s Toroki. Amefuri’s stiffed out, an’ even when he wasn’t, he was a damn psycho, so wasting time trying to track him down would be pointless. An’ we don’t know shit about any of the others.”

She frowned.

“Also, come to think of it, Amefuri bein’ dead means… they need

Hikari because she's the Shinzahou?"

"We're assuming a lot of things, but yes. That's how my thoughts have been going," Chichiri agreed. "Though I can't be specific, I sensed Byakko's chi very clearly in the palace the other day. Aoi isn't just escorting Ouba-hime to meet her potential husband in Shunhou. He's also escorting one of the Tiger's Shichi Seishi to the place where another Byakko Shichi Seishi is already in residence. If Byakko is moving, Myoume is sure to know. And if Hikari can help, then surely she will and everything will be fine."

"An' if it gets more complicated, we'll watch for rogues headin' over the border from Hengei, right?" Shishi frowned. "Rogues or refugees, I guess, either or."

"That's pretty much our job in all of this," Tasuki nodded. "This ain't our legend, so it ain't our fight. Hikari's gone without bein' told all of this — personally I would'a told her, but that's just me. At the end of the day, if she helps them, it's her choice. It ain't up to us. But Byakko's people would'a given us their Shinzahou to raise Suzaku with, more'n twenty years ago. So, given that, we're honour bound to do the same."

"And that means I've entrusted *our* Shinzahou to Myoume, for the time being," Chichiri said finally, "with the belief that, when they meet, one of them will know what's to be done."

"Hey, but ain't Myoume about to drop a kid, or something?" Maichu frowned. "Won't that kind of get in the way?"

"There's no accounting for the decisions of Gods," Tasuki said blackly.

"Tasuki's right," Chichiri nodded. "But a Shichi Seishi is never retired, not really. So whatever the difficulties, I'm sure Myoume will find a way to come through."

"Byakko's legend was done a hundred years ago, right?" Shishi reflected. "Why now? Why again? Genbu's ain't kicked off again. Do-nee's burblin' in my ear about how Hokkan gained peace and kept it. What's so wrong with Sairou's administration that it's only lasted so long?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Chichiri spread his hands, looking mystified. "My impression of Sairou's royal house is that they're inherently stable. More, the population does well considering the harsh landscape and limited resources. They enjoy a good rapport with Kounan and Hokkan and are building stronger ties with Kutou

which can only serve to improve conditions even more. I can't for the life of me work out what could be wrong, but there's no mistaking it. I've met Byakko's people before — five in total now, including Amefuri. Though this one's chi was not one I recognised… it was still undeniably from the same source. A human soul laced with Byakko's blessing — it's quite a distinctive feeling."

"Maybe it's just Miramu's replacement," Maichu mused. "Since he's dead, he's obviously out of the game."

"Possibly," Chichiri pursed his lips. "Either way, by sending Hikari now, I hope, any major disaster may be averted."

He grimaced.

"I also spoke to Taka and Makoto, you know," he admitted. "I didn't tell them everything, but there is one other reason I feel that this is more Byakko's legend kickstarting than just a change in personnel."

"Taka and… who now?" Maichu blinked, and Shishi frowned.

"Taka's the name Hiki's Dad uses now. He's Tamahome, right?" she asked, glancing at her father for confirmation, and Tasuki nodded his head. "As for Makoto — no idea. Someone else from Hiki's world, maybe?"

"Hikari's younger brother," Chichiri agreed. "He seems to be as well informed on all of this now as anyone. I met him briefly eighteen months ago when I went to bring Hikari back here — he's an intelligent young boy of Eiju's age, or thereabouts."

"And he's part of this now, why?"

"Apparently one of Hikari's former school friends disappeared on a visit to a city called Morioka," Chichiri said gravely. "I don't pretend to know anything about the place, except that the location holds the burial place of Byakko's last Miko, Oosugi Suzuno. It was at her graveside that this girl — Arina, her name is — was swallowed up by a blast of white light. Makoto was sure this meant she was pulled into our world… but where she was pulled to is anyone's guess. The fact that she's known to Hikari suggests to me that she might make for Kounan, if she can find aid to help her get there. I promised to keep an eye open for her, if that happened."

"That's who you're expecting to come over the border, then?" Shishi's eyes darkened. "Hiki's stuck up idiot friend from her Tokyo place?"

“You got issues with this chick or something?” Maichu stared at her in surprise, and Shishi shook her head.

“No. Never met her,” She said flatly, “but she sounds like an idiot to me, from everything Hiki’s ever said. An’ now she’s going to be descending on us for help? Great.”

“That’s not the spirit, Shishi.” Chichiri chided. “I remember you being less than enthusiastic about Hikari coming here in the first place, and look how that turned out.”

Despite herself, Shishi reddened.

“Hiki an’ I just got off on the wrong foot, is all,” she defended herself. “But this Arina girl — sounds to me like she’s someone who wouldn’t be afraid to lie or cheat or do that kind of shit to get out of trouble. I don’t like people like that… an’ I’m not really looking to help them out.”

“Hikari said that about Arina?” Chichiri looked surprised. “I’ve met the girl and I didn’t get that impression from her. Besides, if Byakko chose her for this, she can’t be all those things, surely? Maybe you misunderstood.”

“Either way, she’s come here an’ that means she’s probably gonna be the Miko,” Tasuki took a hand.

“Almost certainly,” Chichiri nodded. “Makoto had the opinion that she was Oosugi Suzuno’s reincarnation. I’m not quite sure how he came to that conclusion, but it seems like they had some evidence in that world which backed it up.”

“Even more reason for us to be alert,” Tasuki responded. “Whether she’ll show up in Kounan or not is anyone’s guess, but if she does… nothin’ bad is gonna happen to her. All right?”

He sent Shishi a meaningful look.

“If she’s a brat, then she’s a brat we’ll send to Shunhou an’ Myoume can worry about her,” he added. “An’ if she ain’t, well, we’ll see about what we can do to help her.”

“Seems fair enough to me,” Maichu looked thoughtful. “This Arina wench — how old is she? Hikari’s age?”

“About that,” Chichiri frowned. “That’s the other thing I wanted to say. Time has always moved differently in that world to this. But it seems that, since Hikari came here permanently, the time difference has stabilised and our worlds are now moving alongside each other. Arina is the same age as Hikari — even though they’re worlds apart.

It's probably nothing at all, but it struck me as strange. Even if she is Suzuno-san reincarnated, maybe Arina's been so easily drawn here because the barriers between that world and this aren't as solid as they used to be."

"Meaning that Hiki's still not entirely part of this world?"

"Hikari remembers the other world, and they remember her," Chichiri responded sadly. "I wouldn't have it any other way. But memories are powerful things, Shishi."

He shrugged.

"For the time being, there's no imminent danger on any front as far as I can see." He added. "So there's no need to panic. I just wanted people to be aware of everything — just in case things begin to move more quickly. If Byakko's legend is on the repeat, it might have fall-out for more than just the Western people… so be ready, all right? Just in case they call on their Southern allies for help."

Things were looking more and more positive by the minute.

Makiko stretched and curled her arms in front of the mirror, registering the growing stiffness in the limbs as she did so. Sashi's body would probably not withstand her spiritual onslaught much longer, but now, having met Haruka, she felt confident that it would be long enough to take care of at least one part of her problem.

And Amefuri is dead. I could not have asked for a better outcome. Whatever I thought I sensed here, I was mistaken. Amefuri is dust on the wind, and his cursed soul will take that taint into his next life, just as I hoped. Suffering doesn't end with death, Han Daiyu. I'm sure I told you that when you put your dagger through my heart.

A soft smile curled across her lips. The girl had been suspicious, but it didn't matter. She was a desert rat, and a stranger in the heart of a court where Sashi herself was a beloved and much respected figure. Dispatching of the juvenile would not be difficult. She had failed in the cave, moments after she had awoken, but this time she was sure it would go differently.

Subaru's power has resisted me for far too long, but nobody will care about one dead orphan girl. In fact, given Junbei's behaviour earlier, I could easily put the blame for it at his door. A little too rough with such a delicate young thing, a snapped neck… if he were to hang for it, it would be no concern of mine. Sashi's men are there for my purpose and disposal — and, doubtless, trained to face death with equanimity.

She glanced out at the night sky, pursing her lips as she gauged the position of the moon. It was late, and, probably, Haruka was already asleep, worn out from her long journey.

I could go now. Nobody would notice, if I did, and then…

"Sashi?"

The voice of the prince startled her from her reverie and she swung around, clenching her fists beneath the long sleeves of her gown as she fought to pull her features into a more natural expression.

"Nefuru! You startled me!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to," Nefuru offered her a rueful smile, crossing the room towards her and resting his hands on her shoulders. "You look tired."

I'd be fine, if you just left me to do what I came here to do. You're making it worse for your wife, you know, dragging it out like this. At this rate, she'll drop dead in front of you.

Makiko resisted the urge to curl her lip at his obvious affection, instead adopting a smile.

"I'm all right. It's just been a long and busy day."

"Mm," Nefuru's expression became thoughtful, and he nodded. "I saw Zarin in the hall. I understand you had a child brought here this afternoon?"

Damn.

Makiko's eyes narrowed slightly at this revelation.

If the Crown Prince knows the child is here, killing her might be more complicated. I shall have to find a more subtle method.

Out loud she said,

"A young girl from the desert with a wild imagination. She's claiming to have Byakko's power, but she's not been able to show either a mark or any sign of magic yet. She's an insignificant urchin, really. I thought maybe it was a waste of time, so I didn't send a message to alert you — was that wrong?"

"Claiming to be..?"

"Zarin reported rumours of people falsely claiming to be Byakko's chosen to generate unrest," Makiko nodded her head. "In particular, bearing the mark of the warrior Amefuri. According to the child, that man is conveniently dead, so there's no way to prove his story and I

suspect from what Zarin said he fled our borders to escape punishment for some heavy crime. Apparently the man was a quite notorious criminal. What the girl has to do with him I don't know, but they seem acquainted, and so…"

"You really are bothered about this, aren't you?" Nefuru looked concerned, and Makiko sighed.

"I think of you, and of Shinju's safety," she murmured, in a voice she hoped sounded apprehensive. "I want to know the truth, Nefuru. There's no reason for Byakko to be needed with Sairou as prosperous as this, so all these claims… they make me worried. As though something dark is going on behind our backs."

Nefuru was silent for a moment, then he hugged her tightly, taking her off guard.

"Sairou is as you say, prosperous and safe," he murmured. "You investigate what you think is right, but Sashi, remember that whatever happens, I'll protect you and Shinju — with my life if need be. I promise."